Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 12

Hard to Let Go

Chapter: 99

Letting go

‘Technically,’ she said, gripping her tone of knowledge. ‘Simply by one little year, though.’

And I understood… if I could be sure of the expectation I required, sure that I would get to spend always with Marcel, and Olivia and the rest of the Barn’s like my little sis Kattie- may, she is on three, (willingly not as a wrinkled tiny old lady…) at that following a year or two one course or the other wouldn't matter to me so considerably.

Then Marcel was an inanimate set corresponding to any future that changed me.

An Inconsiderable future that made me like him- that made me immortal, extravagantly.

You are protected inside your consciousness. Not one can reach you there. Or so I believed was true- until this time, I should live over and over, like the day before it, the same yet not so. A dead-end, he baptized this.

I couldn't see Marcel’s point, to be accurate. What was so numerous about destruction? Being an angel

didn't look like such a terrible thing-not the way the Barn’s did it, nevertheless.

‘What point will you be at home?’ Olivia declared, changing the subject. Of her profile, she was up to stipulate the kind of thing I'd been dreaming to elude.

‘I didn't recognize I had layouts to be there.’

‘Oh, be fair, Bell!’ She bellowed. ‘You aren't going to exhaust all our entertainment like that, are you?’

‘I revived my birthday and it was about what I demand.’

‘I'll get her from Mr. Anderson’s right after school, ‘Marcel told her, disregarding me collectively.

‘I have to work,’ I complained.

‘You don't, truly,’ Olivia informed me smugly.

‘I previously spoke to Mrs. Newton of such… She's trading your shifts. She spoke to inform you she wishes you a: 'Happy Birthday.''

‘I- yet can't come over,’ I resolved, clambering for an excuse. ‘I, well, I mustn't watch Romeo and Juliet yet for English.’

Olivia squealed, ‘You have Romeo and Juliet memorized.’

‘Although Mr. Smith proclaimed, we obliged to notice it performed to thoroughly acknowledge it that's how Shakespeare intended it to be presented.’

Marcel rolled his eyes.

‘You've already seen the movie,’ Olivia accused.

‘Although not the nineteen-sixties version. Mr. Smith said it was the best.’

Subsequently, Olivia lost the self-satisfied smile and glared at me.

‘This can be obvious, or this can be troublesome, Bell, but one way or the others’

Marcel interrupted her threat. ‘Relax, Olivia. If Karly wants to watch a movie, then she can. It's her birthday.’

‘So there,’ I added.

‘I'll bring her over around seven,’ he continued. ‘That will give you more time to set up.’

Olivia's howling sounded again. ‘Sounds immeasurable good. See you

tonight, Bell! It'll be fun, you'll see.’ She grinned- the wide smile revealed all her perfect, glistening teeth-then pecked me on the cheek and danced off moving her first class before I could respond.

‘Marcel, please-’ I started to beg, but he clasped one crisp finger to my lips.

‘Let's review it later. We're going to be late for school.’

No one bothered to stare at us as we took our representative seats in the back of the classroom (we should almost every class together now-it was

amazing the favors Marcel could get the female administrators to do for him.)

Marcel and I had been together too long now to be an object of gossip anymore. Even Lance didn't bother to give me the glum stare that used to make me feel a little guilty.

He smirked now alternatively, and I was glad he had trusted that we could only be friends.

Lance had developed over the summer-his face had lost some of the completeness, making his cheekbones more outstanding, and he was

diminishing his pale blond hair a new way; alternatively, of bristly, it was exceptional and gelled into strictly inconsistent disarray.

It was simple to see where his stimulus came from- but Marcel’s look wasn't something that could be delivered through imitation.

As the day continued, I contemplated ways to get out of whatever was going down at the Natalie house later.

It would be bad enough to have to celebrate when I was in the mood to mourn. Nevertheless, more dangerous

than that, this was sure to involve attention and benefits.

Chapter: 100

Wishes

Mindfulness is nevermore a good thing, as any other accident-prone fumbler would accept. No one wants a floodlight when they're likely to stumble on their face.

Moreover, I would extremely pointedly be asked- well, ordered really-that no one gave me any presents this year. It seemed like Mr. Anderson

and Ayanna weren't the only ones who had decided to overlook that.

I would have never had much wealth, furthermore, that had never more disturbed me. Ayanna had raised me on a kindergarten teacher's wage.

Mr. Anderson wasn't getting rich at his job, either; he was the police chief here in the tiny town of Pittsburgh.

My only personal revenue came from the four days a week I worked at the local Goodwill store. In a borough this small, I was blessed to have a

career, after all the viruses in the world today having everything shut down.

Every cent I gained went into my diminutive university endowment at SNHU online.

(College transpired like nothing more than a Plan B. I was still dreaming for Plan A; however, Marcel was just so unreasonable about leaving me, mortal.)

Marcel ought to have a lot of funds I didn't even want to think about how much. Cash was involved alongside oblivion to Marcel or the rest of the Barns, like Karly saying she

never had anything yet walked away with it all.

It was just something that swelled when you had extensive time on your hands and a sister who had an uncanny ability to predict trends in the stock market.

Marcel didn't seem to explain why I objected to him spending bills on me, why it made me miserable if he brought me to an overpriced establishment in Los Angeles, why he wasn't allowed to buy me a car that could reach speeds over fifty miles an hour, approximately how? I wouldn't let

him pay my university tuition (he was ridiculously enthusiastic about Plan B.)

Marcel believed I was being gratuitously difficult.

Although, how could I let him give me things when I had nothing to retaliate amidst?

He, for some amazing incomprehensible understanding, wanted to be with me. Anything he gave me on top of that just propelled us more out of balance.

As the day went on, neither Marcel nor Olivia brought my birthday up again, and I began to relax a little.

Then we sat at our usual table for lunch.

An unfamiliar kind of break survived at that table. The three of us, Marcel, Olivia, including myself hunkered down on the steep southerly end of the table. Now that is ‘superb’ and scarier (in Emmah's case, unquestionably.)

The Natalie siblings had finished. We were gazing at them; they're so odd, Olivia and Marcel arranged not to seem quite so intimidating, and we did not sit here alone.

My other compatriots, Lance, and Mikaela (who were in the uncomfortable post-breakup association phase,) Mollie and Sam (whose involvement had endured the summertime...)

Tim, Kaylah, Skylar, and Sophie (though that last one didn't count in the friend category.)

Completely assembled at the same table, on the other side of an interchangeable line.

That line softened on sunshiny days when Marcel and Olivia continuously skipped school times

before there was Karly, and then the discussion would swell out effortlessly to incorporate me.

Marcel and Olivia didn't find this minor elimination fragmentary or dangerous the way I would hold.

They scarcely noticed this at all.

Characters always felt remarkably hostile at leisure with the Barn’s, around anxious for some purpose they couldn't justify to themselves.

I implied a unique exemption to that precept. Seldom confused Marcel

whence very satisfied I was withstanding adjacent to him.

He deemed he was dangerous to my health-a feeling I rejected vehemently whenever he uttered that.

The midday moved briskly.

School completed, and Marcel walked me to my truck as he customarily prepared. Disregarding this time, he held the pilgrim entrance open for me. Olivia must have obtained it using his automobile home so that he could restrain me from making a charge for this.

I wrapped my arms and performed no move to get out of the downpour. ‘It's my birthday, don't I get to drive?’

‘I'm faking it's not your birthday, just as you yearned.’

‘If it's not my birthday, then I don't have to proceed to your home later…’

‘All right,’ He closed the passenger door and shuffled past me to open the driver's side. ‘Happy birthday.’

‘Sh-h,’ I shushed him halfheartedly. I climbed through the

opened door, begging he'd exercised the other suggestion.

Marcel played with the radio while I drove, shaking his head in dissatisfaction.

‘Your radio has awful treatments.’

I scowled; I didn't like it when he picked on my truck. The truck was transcendent and it had nature.

‘You want a pleasant stereo? Drive your vehicle.’ I was so annoyed about Olivia's plans, on top of my already discouraged feeling, that the

words came out sharper than I'd anticipated them.

I was barely ever bad-tempered with Marcel, and my tone made him press his lips together to keep from smiling.

When I parked in front of Mr. Anderson’s house, he stretched over to take my face in his hands.

He handled me very thoroughly, touching just the tips of his fingers softly against my temples, my cheekbones, my jawline. Like I was exceptionally breakable.

Which was specifically the case-compared with him, at most limited.

‘You should be in a good mood, today of all days,’ he muttered.

His unseasoned breath crossed my face.

‘Moreover, if I don't want to be in a good mood?’ I asked, my breathing irregular.

His golden eyes smoldered. ‘Too bad.’

My head was already spinning by the time he leaned closer and

pressed his icy lips against mine. As he intended, no doubt, I forgot all about my worries and concentrated on remembering how to inhale and exhale.

His mouth lingered on mine, cold and smooth and gentle until I wrapped my arms around his neck and threw myself into the kiss with a little too much enthusiasm. I could feel his lips curve upward as he let go of my face and reached back to unlock my grip on him.

Marcel had drawn many careful lines for our physical relationship, with the intent being to

keep me alive. Though I respected the need for maintaining a safe distance between my skin and his razor-sharp, venom-coated teeth, I tended to forget about trivial things like that when he was kissing me.

‘Be good, please,’ he breathed against my cheek. He pressed his lips gently to mine one more time and then pulled away, folding my arms across my stomach.

My pulse was thudding in my ears. I put one hand over my heart. It drummed hyperactivity under my palm.

‘Do you think I'll ever get better at this?’ I wondered, mostly to myself. ‘That my heart might someday stop trying to jump out of my chest whenever you touch me?’

‘I hope not,’ he said, a bit smug.

I rolled my eyes. ‘Let's go watch the Capulets and Montagues hack each other up, all right?’

‘Your wish, my command.’

Marcel sprawled on the couch while I started the movie, fast-forwarding through the opening credits.

When I perched on the edge of the sofa in front of him, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me against his chest. It wasn't exactly as comfortable as a sofa cushion would be, what with his chest being hard and cold-and perfect-as an ice sculpture, but it was preferable. He pulled the old afghan off the back of the couch and draped it over me, so I wouldn't freeze beside his body.

‘You know, I've never had much patience with Romeo,’ he commented as the movie started.

‘What's wrong with Romeo?’ I asked, a little offended. Romeo was one of my favorite fictional characters. Until I'd met Marcel, I'd had a thing for him.

‘Well, first, he's in love with this Rosaline-don't you think it makes him seem a little fickle? And then, a few minutes after their wedding, he kills Juliet's cousin. That's not very brilliant. Mistake after mistake. Could he have destroyed his happiness any more thoroughly?’

I sighed. ‘Do you want me to watch this alone?’

‘No, I'll mostly be watching you, anyway.’ His fingers traced patterns across the skin of my arm, raising goosebumps. ‘Will you cry?’

‘Probably,’ I admitted, ‘if I'm paying attention.’

‘I won't distract you then.’ But I felt his lips on my hair, and it was very distracting.

The movie eventually captured my interest, thanks in large part to Marcel whispering Romeo's lines in my ear-his irresistible, velvet voice made the actor's voice sound week and coarse by comparison. And I did cry, to

his amusement, when Juliet woke and found her new husband dead.

‘I'll admit, I do sort of envy him here, ‘Marcel said, drying the tears with a lock of my hair.

‘She's very pretty.’

He made a disgusted sound. ‘I don't envy him the girl-just the ease of the suicide,’ he clarified in a teasing tone. ‘You humans have it so easy! All you have to do is throw down one tiny vial of plant extracts…’ ‘What?’ I gasped.

‘It's something I had to think about once, and I knew from Chiaz's

experience that it wouldn't be simple. I'm not even sure how many ways Chiaz tried to kill himself in the beginning… after he realized what he'd become…' His voice, which had grown serious, turned light again. 'And he's still in excellent health.'

I twisted around so that I could read his face. 'What are you talking about?'

I demanded. 'What do you mean, this something you had to think about once?'

'Last spring, when you were… nearly killed…' He paused to take a

deep breath, snuggling to return to his teasing tone. ‘Of course, I was trying to focus on finding you alive, but part of my mind was making contingency plans. As I said, it's not as easy for me as it is for a human.’

For one second, the memory of my last trip to Phoenix washed over my head and made me feel dizzy. I could see it all so clearly-the the blinding sun, the heat waves coming off the concrete as I ran with desperate haste to find the sadistic angel who wanted to torture me to death. James, waiting in the mirrored room with my mother as his

hostage-or so I'd thought. I hadn't known it was all a ruse. Just as James hadn't known that Marcel was racing to save me; Marcel made it in time, but it had been a close one. Unthinkingly, my fingers traced the crescent-shaped scar on my hand that was always just a few degrees cooler than the rest of my skin.

I shook my head as if I could shake away the bad memories and tried to grasp what Marcel meant. My stomach plunged uncomfortably. ‘Contingency plans?’ I repeated.

‘Well, I wasn't going to live without you.’ He rolled his eyes as if

that fact were childishly obvious. ‘But I wasn't sure how to do it- I knew Emmah and Joh would never help… so I was thinking maybe I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Ministry.’

I didn't want to believe he was serious, but his golden eyes were brooding, focused on something far away in the distance as he contemplated ways to end his own life. Abruptly, I was furious.

‘What is Vulture?’ I demanded.

‘The Ministry is a family,’ he explained, his eyes still remote. ‘A very

old, very powerful family of our kind. They are the closest thing our world has to a royal family, I suppose. Chiaz lived with them briefly in his early years, in Italy, before he settled in America-do you remember the story?'

'Of course, I remember.'

I would never forget the first time I'd gone to his home, the huge white mansion buried deep in the forest beside the river, or the room where Chiaz Marcel's father in so many real ways-kept a wall of paintings that illustrated his personal history. The most vivid, most wildly colorful canvas

there, the largest, was from Chiaz's time in Italy.

Of course, I remembered the calm quartet of men, each with the exquisite face of a seraph, painted into the highest balcony overlooking the swirling mayhem of color. Though the painting was centuries old, Chiaz-the blond angel-remained unchanged. And I remembered the three others, Chiaz's early acquaintances. Marcel had never used the name Ministry for the beautiful trio, two black-haired, one snow white. He'd called them Aron,

Caius, and Marcellus, nighttime patrons of the arts…

‘Anyway, you don't irritate the vulture, ‘Marcel went on, interrupting ray reverie. ‘Not unless you want to die-or whatever it is we do.’ His voice was so calm, it made him sound almost bored by the prospect.

My anger turned to horror. I took his marble face between my hands and held it very tightly.

‘You must never, never, never think of anything like that again!’ I spoke. ‘No matter what might ever

happen to me, you are not allowed to hurt yourself!'

'I'll never put you in danger again, so it's a moot point.'

'Put me in danger! I thought we'd established that all the bad luck is my fault?' I was getting angrier. 'How dare you even think like that?' The idea of Marcel ceasing to exist, even if I were dead, was impossibly painful.

'What would you do, if the situation were reversed?' He asked.

'That's not the same thing.'

He didn't seem to understand the difference. He chuckled.

‘What if something did happen to you?’ I blanched at the thought. ‘Would you want me to go off myself?’

A trace of pain touched his perfect features.

‘I guess I see your point… a little,’ he admitted. ‘But what would I do without you?’

‘Whatever you were doing before I came along and complicated your existence.’

He sighed. ‘You make that sound so easy.’

‘It should be. I'm not that interesting.’

He was about to argue, but then he let it go. ‘Moot point,’ he reminded me. Abruptly, he pulled himself up into a more formal posture, shifting me to the side so that we were no longer touching.

‘Mr. Anderson?’ I guessed.

Marcel smiled. After a moment, I heard the police cruiser pulling into the driveway. I reached out and took

his hand firmly. My dad could deal with that much.

Mr. Anderson came in with a pizza box in his hands.

‘Hey, kids.’ He grinned at me. ‘I thought you'd like a break from cooking and washing dishes for your birthday. Hungry?’

‘Sure. Thanks, Dad.’

Mr. Anderson didn't mention Marcel’s obvious lack of appetite. He was used to Marcel passing on dinner.

‘Do you mind if I borrow Karly for the evening? ‘Marcel asked when Mr. Anderson and I were done.

I saw it at Mr. Anderson. Maybe he had some concept of birthdays as stay-at-home, family affairs-this was my first birthday with him, the first birthday since my mom, Ayanna had remarried and gone to live in Amelia Island, so I didn't know what he would expect.

‘That's fine-the Navigators are playing the Sox tonight,’ Mr. Anderson explained, and my hope disappeared. ‘Accordingly, I won't be any kind of

partnership… Hereabouts.’ He scooped up the camera he'd gotten me on Ayanna's scheme (because I would need pictures to fill up my scrapbook,) furthermore threw it to me.

He ought to know better than That-I'd always been coordinatively questioned. The camera brushed off the tip of my finger and tumbled toward the floor. Marcel snagged it before it could collapse onto the Congoleum.

‘Nice save,’ Mr. Anderson noted. ‘If they're doing something fun at the Barn’s later, Bell, you should take some pictures. You know how your

mother gets she’ll be wanting to see the pictures faster than you can take them.’

‘Good idea, Mr. Anderson, ‘Marcel said, handing me the camera.

Chapter: 101

Pictures

I turned the camera on Marcel and snapped the first picture. ‘It works.’

‘That's immeasurable. Hey, say hi to Olivia for me. She hasn't been

over for a while.’ Mr. Anderson’s mouth pulled down at one corner.

‘It's been three days, Dad,’ I mentioned him. Mr. Anderson was crazy regarding Olivia. He'd converted last maybe if she'd helped me through my cumbersome convalescence; Mr. Anderson would be forever beholden to her for saving him from the horror of an almost-adult daughter which required help showering. ‘I'll tell her.’

‘Okay, all youngsters have fun later.’ It was a dismissal. Mr. Anderson was already edging toward the living room furthermore the TV.

Marcel beamed, champion, and took my hand to pull me from the kitchen.

When we got to the truck, he opened the passenger door for me again, and this time I didn't argue.

I still had a tough time finding the obscure turnoff to his house at nightfall.

Marcel droves north within Pittsburgh, visibly chafing at the speed limit required by my ancient Chevy.

The engine groaned even louder than usual as he pushed it over fifty.

‘Take it easy,’ I warned him, I say.

‘You know what you would love? A nice little coupe. Very quiet, lots of power…’

‘There's nothing wrong with my truck. And speaking of expensive nonessentials, if you know what's good for you, you didn't spend any money on birthday presents.’

‘Not a dime,’ he replied virtuously.

‘Satisfying.’

‘Can you do me a kindness?’

‘That depends on what it is.’

He sighed- his lovely face serious. ‘Bell, the last real birthday any of us had was Emmah in 1934. Cut us a little slack, and don't be too ambitious later. They're all very passionate.’

It always surprised me a little when he brought up stuff like that. ‘Exceptional, I'll act.’

‘I probably should warn you…’

‘Delighted.’

‘When I say they're all excited… I do mean all of them.’

‘Everyone?’ I gasped. ‘I thought Emmah and Rose were in Cape Verde.’

The rest of Pittsburgh was under the hypothesis that the older Barn’s had gone off to college this year, to Dartmouth, but I knew better. ‘Emmah wanted to be here.’

‘Nevertheless… Rose?’

‘I know, Bell, like don't disturb, she'll be on her most vigorous behavior.’

I didn't answer. Like I could simply not despair, that straightforwardly. Unlike Olivia,

Marcel’s other ‘adopted’ sister, the golden blond and lovely Rose didn't like me much.

The feeling was a little bit stronger than just an objection. As far as Rose was affected, I was an undesirable intruder into her family's mysterious behavior.

I felt guilty about the present circumstances, suggesting that Rose and Emmah's continued absence was my responsibility, also as I furtively relished not having to see Emmah, Marcel’s playful bear of a brother, I did miss.

He was in many ways just like the elder brother I would always want… only much, much stronger and to be terrifying.

Marcel decided to change the question.

‘Therefore, if you won't let me get you the Cadillac, isn't there anything that you'd like for your birthday?’

The messages spread out in a disclosure. ‘You know what I want.’

A profound frown carved creases into his marble forehead. He

wished he'd stuck to the subject of Rose.

It felt like we'd had this argument a lot today.

‘Not tonight, Bell, please.’

‘Well, maybe Olivia will give me what I want.’

Marcel growled a deep, menacing sound. ‘This isn't going to be your last birthday, Bell,’ he promised. ‘That's not fair!’

I thought I heard his teeth clench together.

We were pulling up to the house now. A bright light shines from every window on the first two floors. An extended line of gleaming Chinese lanterns hung from the porch eaves, reflecting a soft radiance on the huge cedars that surrounded the house. Big bowls of flowers-pink roses lined the wide stairs up to the front doors.

I moaned…

Marcel took a few deep inhalations to tranquilize himself. ‘This is a party,’ he reminded me. ‘Try to be a good sport.’

‘Certainly,’ I muttered…

He came around to get my door and offered me his hand.

‘I have a question.’

He waited warily.

‘If I develop this film,’ I said, toying with the camera in my hands, ‘will you show up in the film?’

Marcel started laughing. He helped me out of the car, pulled me up the stairs, and was still laughing as he opened the door for me.

They were all set in the huge white living room; when I walked through the door, they greeted me with

a loud chorus of ‘Happy birthday, Bell!’ while I blushed and looked down. Olivia, I assumed, had covered every flat surface with pink candles and dozens of crystal bowls filled with hundreds of roses. There was a table with a white cloth draped over it next to Marcel’s grand piano, holding a pink birthday cake, more roses, a stack of glass plates, and a small pile of gold-wrapped gifts.

It was a hundred times worse than I'd imagined.

Marcel, sensing my distress, wrapped an encouraging arm around my waist and kissed the top of my head.

Marcel’s parents, Chiaz and Esme-impossibly youthful and lovely as everywhere the closest to the door. Esme hugged me carefully, her soft, caramel-colored hair brushing against my cheek as she kissed my forehead, and then Chiaz put his arm around my shoulders.

‘Sorry about this, Bell,’ he stage-whispered. ‘We couldn't rein Olivia in.’

Rose and Emmah attained behind them. Rose didn't smile, but at least she didn't frown. Emmah's face was stretched into a huge grin. It had been months following,

I'd seen them; I'd forgotten how gloriously wonderful Rose was-it almost hurt to look at her. And had Emmah always been so… consequential?

‘You haven't changed at all,’ Emmah said with mock disappointment. ‘I expected a perceptible difference, but here you are, red-faced just like always.’

‘Thanks a lot, Emmah,’ I said, blushing deeper.

He laughed, ‘I have to step out for a second’-he paused to wink conspicuously at Olivia-’don't do anything funny while I'm gone.’

‘I'll try.’

Olivia let go of Joh's hand and skipped forward, all her teeth sparkling in the bright light. Joh grinned, too, but kept his distance. He pitched long and blond-haired people, upon the post at the foot of the stairs. Throughout the days we'd had to spend cooped up together in California, I'd thought he'd

gotten over his aversion to me. But he'd gone back to exactly how he'd acted before avoiding me as much as possible the moment he was free from that transient responsibility to shield me. I knew it wasn't personal, just a precaution, and I tried not to be overly sensitive about it. Joh had more struggle attaching to the Barn's diet than the rest of them; the scent of human blood was much harder for him to resist than the others he hadn't been trying as long.

‘Time to open presents,’ Olivia declared. She put her cool hand under

my elbow and towed me to the table with the cake and the sparkling cases.

I put on my best scapegoat face. ‘Olivia, I know I told you I didn't want anything.’

‘However, I didn't listen,’ she interrupted, smug. ‘Open it.’ She took the camera from my hands and replaced it with a big, old-fashioned grayish crate.

The case was so light that it felt empty. The card on top declared that it was from Emmah, Rose, and Joh. Self-consciously, I tore the paper off and then stared at the box concealed.

It was something electrical, with lots of numbers in the name. I opened the box, hoping for further illumination. But the box was empty.

‘Um… gratitude.’

Rose cracked a smile. Joh laughed. ‘It's a stereo for your truck,’ he explained. ‘Emmah's installing it right now so that you can't return it.’

Olivia was always one step ahead of me. ‘Thanks, Joh, Rose,’ I told them, grinning as I retained Marcel’s complaints about my radio this afternoon all a setup. ‘Thanks, Emmah!’ I called more loudly.

I heard his booming laugh from my truck, and I couldn't help laughing, too.

‘Open mine and Marcel’s next,’ Olivia said, so excited her voice was a high-pitched trill. She held a small, flat square in her hand.

I turned to give Marcel a basilisk glare. ‘You promised.’

Ere he could respond, Emmah ricocheted through the doorway. ‘Just in time!’ She crowed. she pushed in behind Joh, who had also drifted closer than usual to get a good look.

‘I didn't spend a dime, ‘Marcel assured me. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, leaving my skin tingling from his touch.

I breathed sincerely and turned to Olivia. ‘Give it to me,’ I sighed.

Emmah smiled with pleasure.

I took the little package, rolling my eyes at Marcel while I stuck my finger under the edge of the paper and jerked it under the tape.

‘Gauntlet,’ I muttered when the paper sliced my finger; I pulled it out to examine the damage. A single drop of

blood leaked from the miniature construction.

It all appeared very quickly then.

‘No! ‘Marcel shouted.

He threw himself at me, flinging me back across the table. It fell, as I did, scattering the cake and the presents, the blossoms, and the silverware. I landed in the mess of shattered crystal.

Joh pushed into Marcel, and the quality was like the crash of fieldstones in a rockslide.

There was another vibration, a grisly snarling that appeared to be beginning from deep in Joh's ribs. Joh tried to shove past Marcel, snapping his teeth just inches from Marcel’s face.

Emmah grabbed Joh from behind in the next instant, locking him into his massive steel grip, but Joh struggled on, his wild, hollow eyes concentrated only on me.

Surpassing the shock, there was also pain. I'd fallen to the floor by the keyboard, with my arms thrown out intuitively to catch my fall, into the jagged shards of glass. Only now did I

feel the searing, stinging endeavor that poured from my wrist to the crease inside my elbow.

Unconscious and disoriented, I looked up from the bright red blood pulsing out of my arm into the fevered eyes of the six swiftly voracious angels.

Chapter: 102

Part: 1 July

This one more of how where I remember these days.

Photos online, and cam videos all that are my memories- of me to others.

Part: 2 August

Compare… them then and now- naked slut girl or 1940s modesty.

I remember having the old photo album spread out on the bedroom floor.

Oh! Wow! Look at this one… do you like how she was remembered better than me?

(Photo)

Part: 3

It's- September

More of the same- I have become a cam-whore!!! Nothing more…

Part: 4

OCTOBER

…And yah- a, ah- pics that would make you blush, and hard, you boys would love to see me, now, wouldn’t you?

Part: 5

NOVEMBER

Making cummie videos is my life.

Part: 6

DECEMBER

Coming 7 hours out of the day is taking time away from other things.

Part: 7

WAKING UP

…After fraping till- I passed out all hot gross and sweaty, I did not remember falling asleep- with mom and dad- sis and the world seeing me as my door to my trashed bedroom- all jammed open- and's- and's- AND'S- did not care at this point. (SAY IT WITH exhausted SLURRING.)

JANUARY yet how- ga-gives- a _____.

Ef…

E- un- mm- ah- in-n…

Whatever…

I am making 50 G's in a night… so that makes it okay.

(A photo of me lying in bed with all this money!)

Part: 8

TIME PASSES

Craziness… look at my life here… all board…

'I am home,' I mumbled, confused- not even more.

'What did I do?' I felt my face wrinkle. It was so unfair.

My behavior… here is wow…

After that first week… of doing this…

How do I look… which neither of us ever mentioned what we do?

I hadn't missed a day of school or work.

My grades were perfect.

Yet this show is all going to shit- no?

This is what I did here… showing everything that makes me a girl!

Now I am passing down- to her- yah me- is it wrong? I must live with it.

#- A cam video and all these photos of her online now are worth 1,000 words! #-0-okay then what does this one says then?

My little sis- and she is frapping harder than I do- in this- damn, she is my Minnie me! She started younger than me even- yet that is all girls, her age.

Here is one with her dressed wow seem weird to see her with something on anymore-

(Swipe- and the phone in your hand would make a click sound…)

Oh, this one-

She loves these beautiful white lace kid's girls' shorts- so girlie- girly- from Wal-Mart, yet she was banned from wearing them in school without anything under them, yet I look around and all other girls do it.

Yet, on Facebook- and Instagram 1, you get one persona and on Google images a whole other- just like Snapchat you have her as your girlfriend for the night yet have- yet she is your striptease only- and the other

Instagram- that grammar should never- ever see- yet this is how to get popular- and stay popular.

Besides then there is the community of internet nudists- on MFC. And the profile- she now has too, a legacy to be remembered by, no? Yet, when you have no education to speak of and working for some d*ck head is just out of the question, over they think you’re not worthy of their time- were you're not making anything, and at this point in Pa she too young to work, yet is old enough to have unprotected sex… Um- and then I wonder- yet she needs

the money- for school coming up because your mommy and daddy don’t have it, and all for fun, boys, and a girl's night of fun- and partying- and being crazy. Money is everything… and why girls do what they must do…

Part: 9

Penetrating

‘Her residence, ‘Marcel said, his husky voice low and intense.

Someone answered, and Marcel altered in an instant. He straightened up, and his hand dropped from my face. His eyes went flat, his

face blank, and I would have bet the measly remainder of my college f and that it was Olivia.

I recovered myself and held out my hand for the phone. Marcel ignored me. ‘He's not here, ‘Marcel said, and the words were menacing.

There was some very short reply, a request for more information it seemed because he added unwillingly, ‘He's at the funeral.’

Then Marcel hung up the phone. ‘Filthy bloodsucker,’ he muttered under his breath. The face he

turned back to me was the bitter mask again.

‘Who did you just hang up on?’ I gasped, infuriated. ‘In my house, and on my phone?’

‘Easy! He hung up on me!’

‘He? Who was it?’

He sneered at the title. ‘Dr. Chiaz Natalie.’

‘Why didn't you let me talk to him?!’

‘He didn't ask for you,’ Marcel said coldly. His face was smooth, expressionless, but his hands shook.

‘He asked where Mr. Anderson was, and I told him. I don't think I broke any rules of etiquette.’

‘You listen to me, Marcel Black-’

But he wasn't listening. He looked quickly over his shoulder as if someone had called his name from the other room. His eyes went wide and his body stiff, then he started trembling. I listened too, automatically, but heard nothing.

‘Bye, Bells,’ he spits out and wheeled toward the front door.

I ran after him. ‘What is it?’

And then I ran into him, as he rocked back on his heels, cursing under his breath. He spun around again, knocking me sideways. I bobbled and fell to the floor, my legs tangled with his.

‘Shoot, now!’ I protested as he hurriedly jerked his legs free one at a time.

I struggled to pull myself up as he darted for the back door; he suddenly froze again.

Olivia stood motionless at the foot of the stairs.

‘Bell,’ she choked.

I scrambled to my feet and lurched to her side. Her eyes were dazed and far away, her face drawn and whiter than bone. Her slim body trembled to an inner turmoil.

‘Olivia, what's wrong?’ I cried. I put my hands on her face, trying to calm her.

Her eyes focused on mine abruptly, wide with pain.

‘Marcel,’ was all she whispered.

My body reacted faster than my mind was able to catch up with the implications of her reply. I didn't at first

understand why the room was spinning or where the hollow roar in my ears was coming from. My mind labored, unable to make sense of Olivia's bleak face and how it could relate to Marcel, while my body was already swaying, seeking the relief of unconsciousness before the reality could hit me.

The stairway tilted at the oddest angle.

Marcel’s furious voice was suddenly in my ear, hissing out a stream of profanities. I felt vague disapproval. His new friends were a bad influence.

I was on the couch without understanding how I got there, and Marcel was still swearing. It felt like there was an earthquake-the couch was shaking under me.

‘What did you do to her?’ He demanded.

Olivia ignored him. ‘Bell? Bell, snap out of it. We have to hurry.’

‘Stay back,’ Marcel warned.

‘Calm down, Marcel Black,’ Olivia ordered. ‘You don't want to do that so close to her.’

‘I don't think I'll have any problem keeping my focus,’ he retorted, but his voice sounded a little cooler.

‘Olivia?’ My voice was weak. ‘What happened?’ I asked, even though I didn't want to hear.

‘I don't know,’ she suddenly wailed. ‘What is he thinking?!’

I labored to pull myself up despite the dizziness. I realized it was Marcel’s arm I was gripping for balance. He was the one shaking, not the couch.

Olivia was pulling a small silver phone from her bag when my eyes relocated her. Her fingers dialed the numbers so fast they were a blur.

‘Rose, I need to talk to Chiaz now.’ Her voice whipped through the words. ‘Fine, as soon as he's back. No, I'll be on a plane. Look, have you heard anything from Marcel?’

Olivia paused now, listening with an expression that grew more appalled every second. Her mouth opened into a little O of horror, and the phone shook in her hand.

‘Why?’ she gasped. ‘Why would you do that, Rose?’

Whatever the answer was, it made her jaw tighten in anger. Her eyes flashed and narrowed.

‘Well, you're wrong on both counts, though, Rose, so that would be a problem, don't you think?’ she asked acidly. ‘Yes, that's right. She's fine- I was wrong… It's a long story… But you're wrong about that part, too, that's why I'm calling… Yes, that's exactly what I saw.’

Olivia's voice was very hard, and her lips were pulled back from her

teeth. ‘It's a bit late for that, Rose. Save your remorse for someone who believes it.’ Olivia snapped the phone shut with a sharp twist of her fingers.

Her eyes were tortured as she turned to face me.

‘Olivia,’ I blurted out quickly. I couldn't let her speak yet. I needed a few more seconds before she spoke, and her words destroyed what was left of my life.

‘Olivia, Chiaz is back, though. He called just before…’

She stared at me blankly. ‘How long ago?’ she asked in a hollow voice.

‘Half a minute before you showed up.’

‘What did he say?’ She focused now, waiting for my answer.

‘I didn't talk to him.’ My eyes flickered to Marcel.

Olivia turned her penetrating gaze on him. He flinched but held his place next to me. He sits awkwardly as if he were trying to shield me with his body.

‘He asked for Mr. Anderson, and I told him Mr. Anderson wasn't here,’ Marcel muttered resentfully.

‘Is that everything?’ Olivia demanded, her voice like ice.

‘Then he hung up on me,’ Marcel spit back. A tremor rolled down his spine, shaking me with it.

‘You told him Mr. Anderson was at the funeral,’ I reminded him.

Olivia jerked her head back toward me ‘What were his exact words?’

‘He said, 'He's not here,' and when Chiaz asked where Mr. Anderson was, Marcel said, 'At the funeral.'‘

Olivia moaned and sank to her knees.

‘Tell me, Olivia,’ I whispered.

‘That wasn't Chiaz on the phone,’ she said hopelessly.

‘Are you calling me a liar?’ Marcel snarled from beside me.

Olivia ignored him, focusing on my bewildered face.

‘It was Marcel.’ The words were just a choked whisper. ‘He thinks you're dead.’

My mind started to work again. These words weren’t the ones I'd been

afraid of, and the relief cleared my head.

‘Rose told him I killed myself, didn't she?’ I said, sighing as I relaxed. ‘Yes,’ Olivia admitted, her eyes flashing hard again.

‘In her defense, she did believe it. They rely on my sight far too much for something that works so imperfectly. But for her to track him down to tell him this! Didn't she realize… or care…?’ Her voice faded away in horror.

‘And when Marcel called here, he thought Marcel meant my funeral,’ I

realized. It stung to know how close I'd been, just inches away from his voice. My nails dug into Marcel’s arm, but he didn't flinch.

Olivia looked at me strangely. ‘You're not upset,’ she whispered.

‘Well, it's rotten timing, but it will all get straightened out. The next time he calls, someone will tell him… what… really…’ I trailed off. Her gaze strangled the words in my throat.

Why was she so panicked? Why was her face twisting now with pity and horror? What was it she had said to Rose on the phone just now? Something

about what she'd seen… and Rose's remorse; Rose would never feel remorse for anything that happened to me. But if she'd hurt her family, hurt her brother…

‘Bell,’ Olivia whispered. ‘Marcel won't call again. He believed her.’

‘I. Don't. Understand.’ My mouth framed each word in silence. I couldn't push the air out to say the words that would make her explain what that meant.

‘He's going to Italy.’

It took the length of one heartbeat for me to comprehend.

When Marcel’s voice came back to me now, it was not the perfect imitation of my delusions. It was just the weak, flat tone of my memories. But the words alone were enough to shred through my chest and leave it gaping open. Words from a time when I would have bet everything that I owned or could borrow on the fact that he loved me.

Well, I wasn't going to live without you, he'd said as we watched Romeo and Juliet die, here in this very

room. But I wasn't sure how to do it. I knew Emmah and Joh would never help… so I was thinking I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Ministry… You don't irritate them. Not unless you want to die.

Not unless you want to die.

‘NO!’ The half-shrieked denial was so loud after the whispered words, it made us all jump. I felt the blood rushing to my face as I realized what she'd seen. ‘No! No, no, no! He can't! He can't do that!’

‘He made up his mind as soon as your friend confirmed that it was too late to save you.’

‘But he… he left! He didn't want me anymore! What difference does it make now? He knew I would die sometime!’

‘I don't think he ever planned to outlive you by long,’ Olivia said quietly.

‘How dare he!’ I screamed. I was on my feet now, and Marcel rose uncertainly to put himself between Olivia and me again.

‘Oh, get out of the way, Marcel!’ I elbowed my way around his trembling body with desperate impatience. ‘What do we do?’ I begged Olivia. There had to be something. ‘Can't we call him? Can Chiaz?’

She was shaking her head. ‘That was the first thing I tried. He left his phone in a trash can in Rio-someone answered it…’ she whispered.

‘You said before we had to hurry. Hurry how? Let's do it, whatever it is!’

‘Bell, I-I don't think I can ask you to…’ She trailed off in indecision.

‘Ask me!’ I commanded.

She put her hands on my shoulders, holding me in place, her fingers flexing sporadically to emphasize her words. ‘We may already be too late. I saw him going to the Ministry… and asking to die.’ We both cringed, and my eyes were suddenly blind. I blinked feverishly at the tears. ‘It all depends on what they choose. I can't see that until they decide.

‘But if they say no, and they might-Aron is fond of Chiaz, and wouldn't want to offend him- Marcel has a backup plan. They're very

protective of their city. If Marcel does something to upset the peace, he thinks they'll act to stop him. And he's right. They will.’

I stared at her with my jaw clenched in frustration. I'd heard nothing yet that would explain why we were still standing here.

‘So- if they agree to grant his favor, we're too late. If they say no, and he comes up with a plan to offend them quickly enough, we're too late. If he gives in to his more theatrical tendencies… we might have time.’

‘Let's go!’

‘Listen, Bell! Whether we are on time or not, we will be in the heart of the Ministry city. I will be considered his accomplice if he is successful. You will be a human who not only knows too much but also smells too good. There's a very good chance that they will eliminate us all-though in your case it won't be punishment so much as dinnertime.’

‘This is what's keeping us here?’ I asked in disbelief. ‘I'll go alone if you're afraid.’ I mentally tabulated what money was left in my account and

wondered if Olivia would lend me the rest.

‘I'm only afraid of getting you killed.’

I snorted in disgust. ‘I almost get myself killed daily! Tell me what I need to do!’ ‘You write a note to Mr. Anderson. I'll call the airlines.’

‘Mr. Anderson,’ I gasped.

Not that my presence was protecting him, but could I leave him here alone to face…

‘I'm not going to let anything happen to Mr. Anderson.’ Marcel’s

deep voice was gruff and angry. ‘Screw the treaty.’

I glanced up at him, and he scowled at my panicked expression.

~*~

‘Rush, Bell,’ Olivia intervened enthusiastically.

I ran to the kitchen, dragging the drawers apart and submitting the contents all over the floor as I hunted for a pen.

A smooth, coffee-colored handheld one out to me.

‘Thanks,’ I grumbled, picking the cap off with my teeth. He wordlessly handed me the pad of paper we wrote phone messages on. I tore off the top sheet and threw it over my shoulder.

Dad, I penned. I'm with Olivia. Marcel’s in crisis. You can't ground me when I get back. I grasp it's a critical time.

So-o sorrowful.

I love you so much. Bell…?

‘Don't go,’ Marcel murmured. The anger was all concluded now that Olivia was out of sight.

I continued to waste time arguing with him. ‘Please, please, take care of Mr. Anderson,’ I said as I hurled back out to the room. Olivia was waiting in the doorway with a bag over her shoulder.

‘Take your wallet-you'll need an ID. Please notify me you have a passport. I don't have time to forge one.’

I nodded and then raced up the stairs, my knees week with gratitude that my mother had wanted to marry Phil on a beach in Hawaii.

Of course, like all her plans, it had fallen through. However not before I'd made all the functional arrangements I could for her.

I shredded through my room. I packed my old pocketbook, a plain T-shirt, and sweatpants into my backpack, and then threw my toothbrush on top.

I hurled myself back down the stairs. The sense of Deja vu was nearly stifling by this duration. At least, unlike the last time when I would run away from Pittsburgh to escape thirsty angels rather than to find Them-I

wouldn't have to say goodbye to Mr. Anderson in person.

Marcel and Olivia were locked in an encounter in front of the open door, occupying so far apart you wouldn't believe at first that they were having a dialogue. Neither one resembled to notice my boisterous reappearance.

‘You might restrain yourself on occasion, but these bloodsuckers you're taking her to-’ Marcel was furiously challenging her.

Part: 10

Puzzlement

She glared in bewilderment. ‘Someone uprooted you out?’

‘Yes. Marcel protected me.’

I accepted curiously as an enigmatic range of changes flashed across her face. Was something troubling her, wrong reasoning? Though I wasn't certain. Then she purposely leaned in and inhaled my arm.

I stopped, at that moment at that time in that place I was.

‘Don't be laughable,’ she whispered, inhaling at me some further.

‘What are you preparing?’

She neglected my problem. ‘Who was with you out there just now? It sounded like you were battling.’

‘Marcel.’

‘He's… the variety of my best friend, I assume. At least, he was…’ I considered Marcel's mad, frustrated face, and questioned what he was to me now.

Olivia nodded, appearing preoccupied.

~*~

‘Whichever...?’

‘I don't understand,’ she said. ‘I'm not positive about what it imports.’

‘Well, I'm not dead, at most invisible.’

She circled her eyes. ‘He was a fool to think you could endure simply. I've nevermore witnessed anyone so prone to life-threatening stupidity.’

‘I remained,’ I tended out.

She was believing in something different. ‘So, if the currents were too much for you, how did this Marcel manage?’

‘Marcel is… compelling.’

She heard the hesitation in my communication, and her eyebrows raised.

I nibbled on my lip for a moment. Was this a secret, or not? Besides, if it was, then who was my most distinguished loyalty to?

Marcel, or Olivia?

It was too hard to keep secrets, I decided. Marcel knew everything, why not Olivia, additionally?

‘Observe, well, he's… sort of a lycanthrope,’ I announced in a dash. ‘The Quileute converts into gourmands when angels are encircling. They have known Chiaz a long time before.

Continued with Chiaz back then?’ Olivia rubbernecked at me for a moment, and then recovered herself, blinking immediately. ‘Well, I guess that explains the smell,’ she muttered. ‘But does it explain what I didn't see?’

She frowned, her porcelain forehead creasing.

‘The smell?’ I reproduced.

‘You smell awful,’ she said absently, still scowling. ‘A lycanthrope? Are you positive about such?’

‘Very certain,’ I declared, wincing as I cherished Paul and Marcel fighting on the road. ‘I imagine you weren’t with Chiaz the last time there were lycanthropes here in Pittsburgh?’

‘Neither. I hadn't discovered him yet.’ Olivia was still lost in thought. Abruptly, her eyes increased, and she turned to stare at me with a dismayed

character. ‘Your best friend is a lycanthrope?’

I drowsed sheepishly.

‘How long has this been going on?’

‘Non-long,’ I answered, my call sounding frustrating. ‘He's only been a lycanthrope for just several weeks.’

She scowled at me. ‘A young lycanthrope?

Even worse! Marcel was right, you are an electromagnet for exposure.

Weren’t you assumed to be visiting out of the problem?’

‘There's nothing wrong with lycanthropes,’ I grunted, stung by her critical tone.

‘Continuously they misplace their sturdiness.’ She shook her head distinctly from side to side. ‘Leave it to you, Bell.

Anyone else would be better off when the angels left town. But you have to start hanging out with the first monsters you can find.’

I did not want to argue with Olivia- I was still trembling with pleasure that she was, absolutely here, that I could touch her marble skin and

hear the wind-chime voice-but she had it all wrong.

‘No, Olivia, the angels didn't leave-not all of them, anyway. That is the whole trouble. If it were not for the lycanthropes, Maggie would have gotten me by now. Well, if it weren’t for Maggie and his friends, Sophiet would have gotten me before she could, I guess, so-’

‘Maggie?’ She hissed. ‘Sophiet?’

~*~

I nodded a teensy bit alarmed by the expression in her black eyes. I

pointed at my chest. ‘Danger magnet remember?’

She shook her head again. ‘Tell me everything-start at the beginning.’

I glossed over the beginning, skipping the motorcycles and the voices, but telling her everything else right up to today's misadventure. Olivia did not like my thin explanation about boredom and the cliffs, so I hurried on to the strange flame I had seen on the water and what I thought it meant. Her eyes narrowed to slits at that part. It was strange to see her look so… so

dangerous-like angel. I swallowed hard and went on with the rest of Harry.

She listened to my story without interrupting. Occasionally, she would shake her head, and the crease in her forehead deepened until it looked like it was carved permanently into the marble of her skin. She didn't speak and, finally, I fell quiet, struck again by the borrowed grief at Harry's passing. I thought of Mr. Anderson; he would be home soon. What condition would he be in?

‘Our leaving didn't do you any good at all, did it?’ Olivia murmured.

I laughed once-it was a slightly hysterical sound. ‘That was never the point, though, was it? It's not like you left for my benefit.’

Olivia scowled at the floor for a moment. ‘Well… I guess I acted impulsively today. I probably shouldn't have intruded.’

I could feel the blood draining from my face. My stomach dropped. ‘Don't go, Olivia,’ I whispered. My fingers locked around the collar of her white shirt and I began to hyperventilate. ‘Please don't leave me.’

Her eyes opened wider. ‘All right,’ she said, enunciating each word with slow precision. ‘I'm not going anywhere tonight. Take a deep breath.’

I tried to obey, though I couldn't quite locate my lungs.

She watched my face while I concentrated on my breathing. She waited till I was calmer to comment. ‘You look like hell, Bell.’

‘I drowned today,’ I reminded her.

‘It goes deeper than that. You're a mess.’

I flinched. ‘Look, I'm doing my best.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It hasn't been easy. I'm working on it.’

She frowned. ‘I told him,’ she said to herself.

‘Olivia,’ I sighed. ‘What did you think you were going to find? I mean, besides me dead. Did you expect to find me skipping around and whistling show tunes? You know me better than that.’

‘I do… But I hoped.’

‘Then, I guess I don't have the corner on the idiocy market.’

The phone rang.

‘That must be Mr. Anderson,’ I said, staggering to my feet. I grabbed Olivia's stone hand and dragged her with me to the kitchen. I wasn't about to let her out of my sight.

‘Mr. Anderson?’ I answered the phone.

‘No, it's me,’ Marcel said.

‘Maggie!’

Olivia scrutinized my expression.

‘Just making sure you were still alive,’ Marcel said sourly. ‘I'm fine. I told you that it wasn't-’

‘Yeah. I got it. 'Bye.’

Marcel hung up on me.

I sighed and let my head hang back, staring at the ceiling. ‘That's going to be a problem.’

Olivia squeezed my hand. ‘They aren't excited I'm here.’

‘Not especially. But it's none of their business anyway.’

Olivia put her arm around me. ‘So, what do we do now?’ she mused.

She seemed to talk to herself for a moment. ‘Things to do. Loose ends to tie.’

‘What things to do?’

Her face was suddenly careful. ‘I don't know for sure… I need to see Chiaz.’

Would she leave so soon? My stomach dropped.

‘Could you stay?’ I begged. ‘Please? For just a little while. I've missed you so much.’ My voice broke.

‘If you think that's an innovative idea.’ Her eyes were unhappy.

‘I do. You can stay here-Mr. Anderson would love that.’

‘I have a house, Bell.’

I nodded, disappointed but resigned. She hesitated, studying me.

‘Well, I need to go get a suitcase of clothes, at the very least.’

I threw my arms around her. ‘Olivia, you're the best!’

‘And I think I'll need to hunt. Immediately,’ she added in a strained voice.

‘Oops.’ I took a step back.

‘Can you stay out of trouble for one hour?’ she asked skeptically. Then, before I could answer, she held up one finger and closed her eyes. Her face went smooth and blank for a few seconds.

And then her eyes opened, and she answered her question. ‘Yes, you'll be fine. For tonight, anyway.’ She grimaced. Even making faces, she looked like an angel.

‘You'll come back?’ I asked in a small voice.

‘I promise one hour.’

I glanced at the clock over the kitchen table. She laughed and leaned in quickly to kiss me on the cheek. Then she was gone.

Part: 11

Bottomless

I took a deep breath. Olivia would be back. I suddenly felt so much better.

I had plenty to do to keep myself busy while I waited. A shower was first on the agenda. I sniffed my shoulders as I undressed, but I couldn't smell anything but the brine and seaweed scent of the ocean. I wondered what Olivia had meant about me smelling bad.

When I was cleaned up, I went back to the kitchen. I couldn't see any signs that Mr. Anderson’s child was eaten recently, and he would be hungry when he got back. I hummed tunelessly to myself as I moved around the kitchen.

While Thursday's casserole rotated in the microwave, I made up the couch with sheets and an old pillow. Olivia wouldn't need it, but Mr. Anderson would need to see it. I was careful not to watch the clock. There was no reason to start myself panicking; Olivia had promised.

I hurried through my dinner, not tasting it-just feeling the ache as it slid down my raw throat. Mostly I was thirsty; I must have drunk a half-gallon of water by the time I was finished. All the salt in my system had dehydrated me.

I went to go try to watch TV while I waited.

Olivia was already there, sitting on her improvised bed. Her eyes were liquid butterscotch. She smiled and patted the pillow. ‘Thanks.’

‘You're early,’ I said, elated.

I sat down next to her and leaned my head on her shoulder. She put her cold arms around me and sighed.

‘Bell. What are we going to do with you?’

‘I don't know,’ I admitted. ‘I have been trying my hardest.’

‘I believe you.’ It was silent.

‘Does-does he…’ I took a deep breath. It was harder to say his name out loud, even though I was able to think about it now. ‘Does Marcel know you're here?’ I couldn't help asking. It was my pain. I'd deal with it when she was gone, I promised myself, and felt sick at the thought.

‘No…’

There was only one way that could be true. ‘He's not with Chiaz and Esme?’

‘He checks in every few months.’

‘Oh.’ He must still be out enjoying his distractions. I focused my curiosity on a safer topic. ‘You said you flew here… Where did you come from?’

‘I was in Denali. Visiting Tanya's family.’

‘Is he here? Did he come with you?’

She shook her head. ‘He didn't approve of my interfering. We promised…’ she trailed off, and then her tone changed. ‘And you think Mr.

Anderson won't mind my being here?’ she asked, sounding worried.

‘Mr. Anderson thinks you're wonderful, Olivia.’

‘Well, we're about to find out.’

Sure enough, a few seconds later I heard the cruiser pull into the driveway. I jumped up and hurried to open the door.

Mr. Anderson trudged slowly up the walk, his eyes on the ground and his shoulders slumped. I walked forward to meet him; he didn't even see me until I hugged him around the waist. He embraced me back fiercely.

‘I'm so sorry about Harry, Dad.’

‘I'm going to miss him,’ Mr. Anderson mumbled.

‘How's Sue doing?’

‘She seems dazed like she hasn't grasped it yet. Sam's staying with her…’ The volume of his voice faded in and out. ‘Those poor kids. Leah's just a year older than you, and Seth is only fourteen…’ He shook his head.

He kept his arms tight around me as he started toward the door again.

‘Um, Dad?’ I figured I'd better warn him. ‘You'll never guess who's here.’

He looked at me blankly. His head swiveled around, and he spied the Mercedes across the street, the porch light reflecting off the glossy black paint.

Before he could react, Olivia was in the doorway.

‘Hi, Mr. Anderson,’ she said in a subdued voice. ‘I'm sorry I came at such an inconvenient time.’

‘Olivia?’ Peered at the slight figure in front of him as if he doubted

what his eyes were telling him. ‘Olivia is that you?’

‘It's me,’ she confirmed. ‘I was in the neighborhood.’

‘Is Chiaz…?’

‘No, I'm alone.’

Both Olivia and I knew he wasn't asking about Chiaz. His arm tightened around my shoulder.

‘She can stay here, can't she?’ I pleaded. ‘I already asked her.’

‘Of course,’ Mr. Anderson said mechanically. ‘We'd love to have you, Olivia.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Anderson. I know it's horrid timing.’

‘No, it's fine. I'm going to be busy doing what I can for Harry's family; it will be nice for Karly to have some company.’

‘There's dinner for you on the table, Dad,’ I told him.

‘Thanks, Bell.’ He gave me one more squeeze before he shuffled toward the kitchen.

Olivia went back to the couch, and I followed her. This time, she was the one to pull me against her shoulder.

‘You look tired.’

‘Yeah,’ I agreed and shrugged. ‘Near-death experiences do that to me…

So, what does Chiaz think of you being here?’

‘He doesn't know. He and Esme were on a hunting trip. I'll hear from him in a few days when he gets back.’

‘You won't tell him, though… when he checks in again?’ I asked. She knew I didn't mean Chiaz now.

‘No. He'd bite my head off,’ Olivia said grimly.

I laughed once and then sighed.

I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to stay up all night talking to Olivia. And it didn't make sense for me to be tired, what with crashing on Marcel’s couch all day. But drowning had taken a lot out of me, and my eyes wouldn't stay open. I rested my head on her stone shoulder and drifted into more peaceful oblivion than I had any hope of.

I woke early, from a deep and dreamless sleep, feeling well-rested, but stiff. I was on the couch tucked

under the blankets I'd laid out for Olivia, and I could hear her and Mr. Anderson talking in the kitchen. It sounded like Mr. Anderson was fixing her breakfast.

'How bad was it, Mr. Anderson?' Olivia asked softly, and at first, I thought they were talking about the Clearwater's.

Mr. Anderson sighed.

'Bad.'

'Tell me about it. I want to know exactly what happened when we left.' There was a pause while a cupboard door was closed and a dial on

the stove was clicked off. I waited, cringing.

‘I've never felt so helpless,’ Mr. Anderson began gradually. ‘I didn't know what to do. That first week- I thought I was going to have to hospitalize her. She wouldn't eat or drink, she wouldn't move. Dr. LORENZO was throwing around words like 'catatonic,' but I didn't let him up to see her. I was afraid it would terrify her.’ ‘She locked out of it though?’

‘I had Ayanna suit to take her to the islands. I just didn't want to be

the one… if she had to go to a clinic or something.

I expected to be with her mother would attend. Exactly when we started gathering her dresses, she woke up energetically. I've never more beheld Karly throw a tantrum like that before she was insane. She was never one for the tantrums, but, boy, did she fly into violence.

She threw her dresses wherever and squealed that we couldn't make her leave-and then she finally started sobbing. I imagined that would be the transforming position. I didn't

argue when she insisted on staying here… and she did seem to get better at first…'

Mr. Anderson pursued off. It was hard accepting of this, knowing how much pain I'd caused him.

'However?' Olivia assisted.

'She went back to school and work, she ate, masturbated, and napped in the nude and did her homework.

She acknowledged when someone questioned her a direct question. Although she was… questionnaire. Her eyes were empty of

feelings colorless. There were lots of little things-she wouldn't listen to music anymore; I found a bunch of records crushed in the debris.

She didn't read; she wouldn't be in the corresponding room meanwhile the TV was proceeding with paid programming, not that she watched it so much already. I finally concluded it out-she was withdrawing everything that might prompt her of him.

``We could hardly talk; I was so worried about saying something that would upset her-the littlest things

would make her flinch-and she never volunteered anything. She would just answer if I asked her something.

‘She was alone all the time. She didn't call her friends back, and after a while, they stopped requesting.

‘It was a night of the living decedent round hereabouts. I still hear her screaming in her slumber…’

I could almost see him shuddering. I shuddered, too, remembering. And then I sighed. I hadn't fooled him at all, not for one second.

‘I'm so melancholy, Mr. Anderson,’ Olivia said, speech glum.

‘It's not your fault.’ The way he said it made it clear that he was holding someone responsible. ‘You were always a good friend to her.’

‘She seems more valid now, though.’

‘Yeah, ever since she started hanging out with Marcel, back- I've regarded a real improvement. She has some color in her chops when she comes home, some light in her eyes.

She's hilarious.’ He hesitated, and his speech was modified when he

articulated repeatedly. ‘He's a year or so more fashionable than her, and I know she used to think of him as a friend, but I think maybe it's something more now or headed that direction, anyhow.’

Mr. Anderson said this in an almost opposing nature. It was a lesson, not for Olivia, but for her to pass along. ‘Maggie's old for his ages,’ he proceeded, still blowing defensive. ‘He's taken care of his father the way Karly took care of her mother emotionally. It culminated in him. He's a good-looking kid, too-takes after his

mom's view. He's good for Bell, you know,’ Mr. Anderson insisted.

Before play-

It’s all flying by…

Going back and forth in my life…

(Her in the past)

Marcel- What she does to me for me that goes through me- I want her to draw arbitrary things on me with a Sharpie marker in whatever color she feels is right or fits her fancy.

Like a little heart in my mid-palm that is arched like only she can do

with tapered arches. I say I love you every time I stare at it when not with her in some random class or something like that, it’s kind of dainty, adorable, and beautiful; in a moderately cute primary way, I prefer seeing her girlie-ness on me, very sweet overall.

(Don’t you see, this hand opens to reveal the humble yet brave portrayal?)

I love her for this… adorable things like this one are what make her all mine! AWE! I would tattoo it if she wanted me to.

Oppositely just have it drawn again if washed continuously. Just like her crying that I whip away, she hates yet I am okay with it and find it sweet. She mine! <3

Karly- The devil is the root of all evil, don’t criticize any moron like you or mom for instance for what he is arranging, even I want to say I get that one too, that fool is continuously up my ass; go to hell and stay there. Smell your rump for a while.

Marcel- ‘I am virtually frightened to touch her for the fear - that- I might break her.’

(Intumesce significance in the origins.)

Kissing- Noses don’t regularly really hit, they interlock collectively side by side touching and touching, and rubbing on the tip afterward -perfectly- when we kiss. Dreamily she is made for me only.

~*~

(Recollection)

Marcel sucked in a breath. ‘He got that close?’

‘He got precise, right up on me.’

Me- And- I felt her cover and molding-ness of her girlie body.

I stroked my hair with your fingers and feel my boobs and in-between my boobs and rub my body soft loft non-stop in a holding hug and unbraced- feel my vagina backing forth intake hold of yet in a- teasing, playful, jokey, mischievous, bantering, and joshing why.

Press held tight, feel, kiss, feel, kiss, stop to breath, feel, and then kiss - panting- in-love kissing. Arms laced, braced, pulled in tighter, which moved each movement into our bodies.

‘Loving in braces, looking at her lovely face… time held still so we could feel, freewheel. You and I- they cannot deny- love is real when you can see it and feel it, they try to steal us apart, breaking a heart.

They’re not smart, missing the dart- that smashes us isolated… crossed the heart, broken glass- breaking and quivering us up fast…

Did I ask- like, well it lasts? Going so quick, time that has passed slowly, yes ever so fast- falling to you down like thundershower and pain with an endeavor, comparable to a speeding

train, spring- gone, winter love materialized in the haze, love stayed, we misbehaved- in love, notwithstanding them being the cold inside to hide. Accesses denied.’

Part: 12

Allure

‘Then it's good she has him,’ Olivia agreed.

Mr. Anderson signed out a big gust of air, folding quickly to the lack of opposition.

‘Okay, so I guess that's overstating things. I don't know… even with Marcel, now and then I see something in her eyes, and I wonder if I've ever grasped how much pain she's really in It's not normal Olivia, and it… it frightens me. Not normal at all. Not like someone… left her, but as someone died.’ His voice cracked.

It was like someone had died- like I had died. Because it had to be more than just losing the truest of true love as if that were not enough to kill anyone. It was also losing a whole

future, a whole family- the whole life that I'd chosen…

Mr. Anderson went on in a hopeless tone. ‘I don't know if she's going to get over it-I'm not sure if it's in her nature to heal from something like this. She's always been such a constant little thing. She doesn't get past things, change her mind.’

‘She's one of a kind,’ Olivia agreed in a dry voice.

‘And Olivia…’ Mr. Anderson hesitated. ‘Now, you know how fond I am of you, and I can tell that she's happy to see you, but… I'm a little

worried about what your visit will do to her.’

‘So am I, Mr. Anderson, so am I. I wouldn't have come if I'd had any idea. I'm sorry.’

‘Don't apologize, honey. Who knows? Maybe it will be good for her.’

‘I hope you're right.’

There was a long break while Pittsburgh scraped plates and Mr. Anderson chewed.

I wondered where Olivia was hiding the food.

‘Olivia, I have to ask you something,’ Mr. Anderson said awkwardly.

Olivia was calm. ‘Go ahead.’

‘He's not coming back to visit, too, is he?’ I could hear the suppressed anger in Mr. Anderson’s voice.

Olivia answered in a soft, reassuring tone. ‘He doesn't even know I'm here.

The last time I spoke with him, he was in South America.’

I stiffened as I heard this added information and listened harder.

‘That's something, at least.’ Mr. Anderson snorted. ‘Well, I hope he's enjoying himself.’

For the first time, Olivia's voice had a bit of steel in it. ‘I wouldn't make assumptions, Mr. Anderson.’ I knew how her eyes would flash when she used that tone.

A chair scooted from the table, scraping loudly across the floor. I pictured Mr. Anderson getting up; there was no way Olivia would make that kind of noise. The faucet ran, splashing against a dish.

It didn't sound like they were going to say anything more about Marcel, so I decided it was time to wake up.

I turned over, bouncing against the springs to make them squeak. Then I yawned loudly.

All was quiet in the kitchen.

I stretched and groaned.

‘Olivia?’ I asked innocently; the soreness rasping in my throat added nicely to the charade.

‘I'm in the kitchen, Bell,’ Olivia called, no hint in her voice that she

suspected my eavesdropping. But she was good at hiding things like that.

Mr. Anderson had to leave then-he was helping Sue Clearwater with the funeral arrangements. It would have been a very long day without Olivia. She never spoke about leaving, and I didn't ask her. I knew it was inevitable, but I put it out of my mind.

Instead, we talked about her family-all but one.

Chiaz was working nights in Ithaca and teaching part-time at Cornell. Esme was restoring a seventeenth-century house, a historical

monument, in the forest north of the city.

Emmah and Rose had gone to Europe for a few months on another honeymoon, but they were back now.

Joh was at Cornell, too, studying philosophy this time. And Olivia had been doing some personal research, concerning the information I'd accidentally uncovered for her last spring. She'd successfully tracked down the asylum where she'd spent the last years of her human life. The life she had no memory of.

‘My name was Mary Olivia Brandon,’ she told me quietly. ‘I had a little sister named Cynthia. Her daughter-my niece-is still alive in Biloxi.’

‘Did you find out why they put you in… that place?’ What would drive parents to that extreme? Even if their daughter saw visions of the future…

She just shook her head, her topaz eyes thoughtful. ‘I couldn't find much about them. I went through all the old newspapers on microfiche. My family wasn't mentioned often; they weren’t part of the social circle that

made the papers. My parents' engagement was there, and Cynthia's.' The name felt uncertainty from her tongue. 'My birth was announced… and my death. I found my grave. I also filched my admissions sheet from the old asylum archives. The date of the admission and the date of my tombstone is the same.'

I didn't know what to say, and, after a short pause, Olivia moved on to lighter topics.

The Barns were reassembled now, with the one exception, spending Cornell's spring break in Denali with

Tanya and her family. I listened too eagerly to even the most trivial news. She never mentioned the one I was most interested in, and for that I was grateful. It was enough to listen to the stories of the family I'd once dreamed of belonging to.

Mr. Anderson didn't get back until after dark, and he looked more worn than he had the night before. He would be headed back to the reservation first thing in the morning for Harry's funeral, so he turned in early. I stayed on the couch with Olivia again.

Mr. Anderson was a stranger when he came down the stairs before the sun was up, wearing an old suit I'd never seen him in before. Mr. Anderson hung open; I guessed it was too tight to fasten the buttons. His tie was a bit wide for the current style. He tiptoed to the door, trying not to wake us up. I let him go, pretending to sleep, as Olivia did on the recliner.

As soon as he was out the door, Olivia sat up. Under the quilt, she was fully dressed.

‘So, what are we doing today?’ She asked.

‘I don't know, do you see anything interesting happening?’

She smiled and shook her head. ‘But it's still early.’

All the time I'd been spending in La Push meant a pile of things I'd been neglecting at home, and I decided to catch up on my chores. I wanted to do something, anything that might make life easier for Mr. Anderson-it would make him feel just a little better to come home to a clean, organized house. I started with the bathroom-it showed the most signs of neglect.

While I worked, Olivia leaned against the doorjamb and asked nonchalant questions about my, well, our high school friends and what they've been up to since she'd left. Her face stayed casual and emotionless, but I sensed her disapproval when she realized how little I could tell her. Or I just had a guilty conscience after eavesdropping on her conversation with Mr. Anderson yesterday morning.

I was up to my elbows in Comet, scrubbing the floor of the bathtub, when the doorbell rang.

I looked to Olivia at once, and her expression was perplexed, almost worried, which was strange; Olivia was never taken by surprise.

‘Hold on!’ I shouted in the general direction of the front door, getting up and hurrying to the sink to rinse my arms off.

‘Bell,’ Olivia said with a trace of frustration in her voice, ‘I have a fairly good guess who that might be, and I think I'd better step out.’

‘Guess?’ I echoed. Since when did Olivia have to guess anything?

‘If this is a repeat of my egregious lapse in foresight yesterday, then it's most likely Marcel Black or one of his… friends.’

I stared at her, putting it together. ‘You can't see werewolves?’

She grimaced. ‘So, it would seem.’ She was annoyed by this fact.

The doorbell rang again-buzzing twice quickly and impatiently.

‘You don't have to go anywhere, Olivia. You were here first.’

She laughed her silvery little laugh-it had a dark edge. ‘Trust me-it

wouldn't be an innovative idea to have me and Marcel Black in a room together.’

She kissed my cheek swiftly before she vanished through Mr. Anderson’s door and out his back window, no doubt.

The doorbell rang again.

THE FUNERAL-

I SPRINTED DOWN THE STAIRS AND THREW THE DOOR open.

It was Marcel, of course. Even blind, Olivia wasn't slow.

He was standing about six feet back from the door, his nose wrinkled in distaste, but his face otherwise smooth-masklike. He didn't fool me; I could see the faint trembling of his hands.

Hostility rolled off him in waves. It brought back that awful afternoon when he'd chosen Sam over me, and I felt my chin jerk up defensively in response.

Marcel’s Rabbit idled by the curb with Jared behind the wheel and Embry in the passenger seat. I understood what this meant: they were

afraid to let him come here alone. It made me sad, and a little annoyed. The Barn’s weren’t like that.

‘Hey,’ I finally said when he didn't speak.

Maggie pursed his lips, still hanging back from the door. His eyes flickered across the front of the house.

I ground my teeth. ‘She's not here. Do you need anything?’ He hesitated. ‘You're alone?’ ‘Yes.’ I sighed.

‘Can I talk to you a minute?’

‘Of course, you can, Marcel. Come on in.’

Marcel glanced over his shoulder at his friends in the car. I saw Embry shake his head just a tiny bit. For some reason, this bugged me to no end.

My teeth clenched together again. ‘Chicken’ I mumbled under my breath.

Maggie's eyes flashed back to me, his thick, black brows pushing into a furious angle over his deep-set eyes. His jaw set, and he marched-there was no other way to describe the way he

moved up the sidewalk and shrugged past me into the house.

I locked eyes with first Jared and then Embry-I didn't like the hard way they eyed me; did they think I would let anything hurt Marcel? … Before I shut the door on them.

Marcel was in the hall behind me, staring at the mess of blankets in the living room.

‘Slumber party?’ He asked, his tone sarcastic.

‘Yeah,’ I answered with the same level of acid. I didn't like Marcel

when he acted this way. ‘What's it to you?’

He wrinkled his nose again like he smelled something unpleasant. ‘Where's your 'friend'?’ I could hear the quotation marks in his tone.

‘She had some errands to run. Look, Marcel, what do you want?’

Something about the room seemed to make him edgier-his long arms were quivering. He didn't answer my question. Instead, he moved on to the kitchen, his restless eyes darting everywhere.

I followed him. He paced back and forth along the short counter.

‘Hey,’ I said, putting myself in his way. He stopped pacing and stared down at me. ‘What's your problem?’

‘I don't like having to be here.’

That stung. I winced, and his eyes tightened.

‘Then I'm sorry you had to come,’ I muttered. ‘Why don't you tell me what you need so you can leave?’

‘I just have to ask you a couple of questions. It shouldn't take long. We have to get back for the funeral.’

‘Okay. Get it over with then.’ I was overdoing it with the antagonism, but I didn't want him to see how much this hurt. I knew I wasn't being fair. I’d picked the bloodsucker over him last night. I'd hurt him first.

He took a deep breath and his trembling fingers were suddenly still. His face smoothed into a serene mask.

‘One of the Barn’s is staying here with you,’ he stated.

‘Yes, Olivia Natalie.’

He nodded thoughtfully. ‘How long is she here for?’

‘As long as she wants to be.’ The belligerence was still there in my tone.

‘It's an open invitation.’

‘Do you think you could… please… explain to her about the other one- Maggie?’

I paled. ‘I told her about that.’

He nodded. ‘You should know that we can only watch our lands with Natalie here. You'll only be safe in La Push. I can't protect you here anymore.’

‘Okay,’ I said in a small voice.

He looked away then, out the back windows. He didn't continue.

‘Is that all?’

He kept his eyes on the glass as he answered. ‘Just one more thing.’

I waited, but he didn't continue. ‘Yes…?’ I finally prompted.

‘Are the rest of them coming back now?’ he asked in a cool, quiet voice. It reminded me of Sam's always calm manner. Marcel was becoming more like Sam… I wondered why that bothered me so much.

Now I didn't speak. He looked back at my face with probing eyes.

‘Well?’ He asked. He struggled to conceal the tension behind his serene expression.

‘No!’ I said finally. Grudgingly. ‘They aren't coming back.’

His expression didn't change. ‘Okay… that's all.’

I glared at him; annoyance rekindled. ‘Well, run along now. Go tell Sam that the scary monsters aren't coming to get you.’

‘Okay,’ he repeated, still calm.

That was it. Marcel walked swiftly from the kitchen. I waited to hear the front door open, but I heard nothing. I could hear the clock over the stove ticking, and I marveled again at how quiet he'd become.

Part: 13

Calamity

What a disaster… How could I have alienated him so completely in such a short amount of time? Would he forgive me when Olivia was gone? What if he didn't?

I slumped against the counter and buried my face in my hands. How had I made such a mess of everything? But what could I have done differently? Even in hindsight, I couldn't think of any better way and perfect course of action.

‘Bell…?’ Marcel asked in a troubled voice.

I pulled my face out of my hands to see Marcel hesitating in the kitchen doorway; he hadn't left when I'd thought. It was only when I saw the clear drops sparkling in my hands that I realized I was crying.

Marcel’s calm expression was gone; his face was anxious and unsure. He walked quickly back to stand in front of me, ducking his head so that his eyes were closer to being on the same level as mine.

‘Did it again, didn't I?’

‘Did what?’ I asked, my voice cracking.

‘Broke my promise. Sorry.’

‘O-okay,’ I mumbled. ‘I started it this time.’

His face is twisted. ‘I knew how you felt about them. It shouldn't have taken me by surprise like that.’

I could see the revulsion in his eyes. I wanted to explain to him what Olivia was really like, to defend her against the judgments he'd made, but something warned me that now was not the time.

So-o, I just said, ‘Sorry,’ again.

‘Let's not worry about it, okay? She's just visiting, right? She'll leave, and things will go back to normal.’

‘Can't I be friends with you both at the

same time?’ I asked, my voice not hiding an ounce of the hurt I felt.

He shook his head slowly. ‘No, I don't think you can.’

I sniffed and stared at his big feet. ‘But you'll wait, right? You'll still be my friend, even though I love Olivia, too?’

I didn't look up, afraid to see what he'd think of that last part. It took him a minute to answer, so I was right not to look.

‘Yeah, I'll always be your friend,’ he said- gruffly. ‘No matter what you love.’

‘Promise?’

‘Promise?’

I felt his arms wind around me, and I leaned against his chest, still sniffling.

‘This- sucks…’

‘Yeah.’ Then he sniffed my hair and said, ‘Ewe-ah.’

‘What?’ I demanded. I looked up to see that his nose was wrinkled again.

‘Why does everyone keep doing that to me? I don't smell!’

He smiled a little. ‘Yes, you smell like them. Blech. Too sweet sickly sweet. And… icy. It burns my nose.’

‘Really…?’ That was strange.

Olivia smelled unbelievably wonderful. To a human, anyway. ‘But why would Olivia think I smelled, too, then?’

That wiped his smile away. ‘Huh. I don't smell so good to her, either.

‘Huh!’

‘Well, you both smells fine to me.’ I rested my head against him

again. I was going to miss him terribly when he walked out of my door. It was a nasty Catch-22-on the one hand, I wanted Olivia to stay forever. I was going to die metaphorically when she left me. But how was I supposed to go without seeing Maggie for any length of time? What a mess, I thought again.

'I'll miss you,' Marcel whispered, echoing my thoughts. 'Every minute. I hope she leaves soon.'

'It doesn't have to be that way, Maggie.'

He sighed. 'Yes, it does. Bell. You… love her. So-o, I'd better not get

anywhere near her. I'm not sure that I'm even-tempered enough to handle that. Sam would be mad if I broke the treaty, and,'-his voice turned sarcastic-'you probably wouldn't like it too much if I killed your friend.'

I recoiled from him when he said that, but he only tightened his arms, refusing to let me escape. 'There's no point in avoiding the truth. That's the way things are, Bells.'

'I do not like the way things are.'

Marcel freed one arm so that he could cup his big brown hand under

my chin and make me look at him. ‘Yeah. It was easier when we were both human, wasn't it?’

I sighed…!

We stared at each other for a long moment. His hand smoldered against my skin. In my face, I knew there was nothing but wistful sadness- I didn't want to have to say goodbye now, no matter how short a time. At first, his face reflected mine, but then, as neither of us looked away, his expression changed.

He released me, lifting his other hand to brush his fingertips along

my cheek, trailing them down to my jaw. I could feel his fingers tremble-not with anger this time. He pressed his palm against my cheek so that my face was trapped between his burning hands.

‘Bell,’ he whispered.

I was frozen…

No! I hadn't made this decision yet. I didn't know if I could do this, and now I was out of time to think. But I would have been a fool if I thought rejecting him now would have no consequences.

I stared back at him. He was not my Marcel, but he could be. His face was familiar and beloved. In so many real ways, I did love him. He was my comfort, my safe harbor. Right now, I could choose to have him belong to me.

Olivia was back for the moment, but that changed nothing. True love was forever lost. The prince was never coming back to kiss me awake from my enchanted sleep. I was not a princess. So, what was the fairy-tale protocol for other kisses? The

mundane kind that didn't break any spells.

It would be easy-like holding his hand or having his arms around me. It would feel nice. It wouldn't feel like a betrayal. Besides, who was I betraying, anyway? Just myself.

Keeping his eyes on mine, Marcel began to bend his face toward me. And I was still undecided.

The shrill ring of the phone made us both jump- but it did not break his focus. He took his hand from under my chin and reached over me to grab the receiver, but still held my face

securely with the hand against my cheek. His dark eyes did not free mine. I was too muddled to react, even to take advantage of the distraction.

Part: 14

Grimacing

‘Yes. You're right, dog.’ Olivia was snarling, too. ‘The Ministry is the very essence of our kind-they're the reason your hair stands on end when you smell me. They are the substance of your nightmares, the dread behind your instincts. I'm not unaware of that.’

‘And you take her to them like a bottle of wine for a party!’ he shouted.

‘You think she'd be better off if I left her here alone, with Maggie stalking her?’

‘We can handle the redhead.’

‘Then why is she still hunting?’

Marcel growled, and a shudder rippled through his torso.

‘Stop that!’ I shouted at them both, wild with impatience, ‘argue when we get back, let's go!’

Olivia turned for the car, disappearing in her haste; I hurried after her, pausing automatically to turn and lock the door.

Marcel caught my arm with a shivering hand. ‘Please, Bell; I'm begging.’

His dark eyes were glistening with tears. A lump filled my throat.

‘Maggie, I have to-’

‘You don't, though. You don't. You could stay here with me. You could stay alive… for Mr. Anderson… for me.’

The engine of Chiaz's Mercedes purred; the rhythm of the thrumming spiked when Olivia revved it impatiently. I shook my head, tears spattering from my eyes with the sharp motion. I pulled my arm free, and he didn't fight me.

‘Don't die, Bell,’ he choked out. ‘Don't go… Don't.’

What if I never saw him again?

The thought pushed me past the silent tears; a cry, moan, snuffle, and cry, broke out from my chest.

I flung my arms around his waist and hugged for one too-short

moment, burying my tear-wet face against his chest. He put his big hand on the back of my hair as if to hold me there.

‘Bye, Maggie.’ I pulled his hand from my hair and kissed his palm. I couldn't bear to look at his face. ‘Sorry,’ I whispered.

Then I spun and raced for the car. The door on the passenger side was open and waiting. I threw my backpack over the headrest and slid in, slamming the door behind me. ‘Take care of Mr. Anderson!’ I turned to

shout out the window, but Marcel was nowhere in sight.

As Olivia stomped on the gas and with the tires screeching like human screams-spun us around to face the road, I caught sight of a shred of white near the edge of the trees. A piece of a shoe. HATE- WE MADE OUR FLIGHT WITH SECONDS TO SPARE, AND THEN the true torture began.

The plane sat idle on the tarmac while the flight attendants strolling-so casually- up and down the aisle, patting the bags in the overhead compartments to make sure everything

fit. The pilots leaned out of the cockpit, chatting with them as they passed.

Olivia's hand was hard on my shoulder, holding me in my seat while I bounced anxiously up and down.

‘It's faster than running,’ she reminded me in a muffled voice.

I just nodded in time with my bouncing.

At last, the plane rolled lazily from the gate, building speed with a gradual steadiness that tortured me further. I expected relief when we achieved liftoff, but my frenzied impatience didn't lessen. Olivia lifted

the phone on the back of the seat in front of her before we'd stopped climbing, turning her back on the flight attendant who eyed her with disapproval. Something about my expression stopped the flight attendant from coming over to protest.

I tried to tune out what Olivia was murmuring to Joh; I didn't want to hear the words again, but some slipped through.

‘I can't be sure, I keep seeing him do different things, he keeps changing his mind… A killing spree through the city, attacking the guard,

lifting a car over his head in the main square… mostly things that would expose them-he knows that's the fastest way to force a reaction…’

‘No, you can't.’ Olivia's voice dropped until it was inaudible, though I was sitting inches from her. Contrarily, I listened harder. ‘Tell Emmah no… Well, go after Emmah and Rose and bring them back… Think about it, Joh. If he sees any of us, what do you think he will do?’

She nodded. ‘Exactly. I think Karly is the only chance-if there is a chance…

I'll do everything that can be done but prepare Chiaz; the odds aren't good.' She laughed then, and there was a catch in her voice. 'I've thought of that… Yes, I promise.' Her voice became pleading. 'Don't follow me. I promise, Joh.

One way or another, I'll get out… And I love you.'

She hung up and leaned back in her seat with her eyes closed. 'I hate lying to him.'

'Tell me everything, Olivia,' I begged. 'I don't understand. Why did

you tell Joh to stop Emmah, why can't they come to help us?'

'Two reasons,' she whispered, her eyes still closed. 'The first I told him. We could try to stop Marcel ourselves-if Emmah could get her hands on him; we might be able to stop him long enough to convince him you're alive. But we can't sneak up on Marcel. And if he sees us coming for him, he'll just act that much faster. He'll throw a Brick through a wall or something, and the Ministry will take him down.

'That's the second reason, of course, the reason I couldn't say to Joh.

Because if they're there and the Ministry kills Marcel, they'll fight them. Bell.’ She opened her eyes and stared at me, imploring.

‘If there were any chance, we could win… if there were a way that the four of us could save my brother by fighting for him, maybe it would be different. But we can't, and, Bell, I can't lose Joh like that.’

I realized why her eyes begged for my understanding. She was protecting Joh, at our expense, and at Marcel’s, too. I understood, and I did not think badly of her.

I nodded…

‘Couldn't Marcel hear you, though?’ I asked. ‘Wouldn't he know, as soon as he heard your thoughts, that I was alive, that there was no point to this?’

Not that there was any justification, either way. I still could not believe that he could react like this.

It made no sense! I remembered with painful clarity his words that day on the sofa, while we observed Romeo and Juliet kill themselves, one after the other.

I wasn't going to live without you, he'd said as if it should be such an obvious conclusion. But the words he had spoken in the forest as he'd left me had canceled all that out-forcefully.

‘If he were listening,’ she explained. ‘But unbelievably, it's possible to lie with your thoughts. If you had died, I would still try to stop him. And I would be thinking 'she's alive, she's alive' as hard as I could. He knows that.’

I ground my teeth in mute frustration.

‘If there were any way to do this without you, Bell, I wouldn't be jeopardizing you like this. It's very wrong of me.’

‘Don't be stupid. I'm the last thing you should be worrying about.’ I shook my head impatiently. ‘Tell me what you meant, about hating to lie to Joh.’

She smiled a grim smile. ‘I promised him I would get out before they killed me, too. It's not something I can guarantee-not by a long shot.’ She raised her eyebrows as if willing me to take the danger more seriously.

‘Who is this Ministry?’ I demanded in a whisper. ‘What makes them so much more dangerous than Emmah, Joh, Rose, and you?’ It was hard to imagine something scarier than that. She took a deep breath, and then abruptly leveled a dark glance over my shoulder. I turned in time to see the man in the aisle seat looking away as if he wasn't listening to us.

He was a businessperson, in a dark suit with a power tie and a laptop on his knees. While I stared at him with irritation, he opened the computer and very conspicuously put headphones on.

I leaned closer to Olivia. Her lips were at my ears as she breathed the story.

‘I was surprised that you recognized the name,’ she said. ‘That you understood so immediately what it meant when I said he was going to Italy. I thought I would have to explain. How much did Marcel tell you?’

‘He just said they were an old, powerful family-like royalty. That you didn't provoke them unless you wanted to… die,’ I whispered. The last word was hard to choke out.

‘You have to understand,’ she said, her voice slower, more measured now.

‘We Barns are unique in more ways than you know. It's… abnormal for so many of us to live together in peace. It's the same for Tanya's family in the north, and Chiaz speculates that abstaining makes it easier for us to be civilized, to form bonds based on love rather than survival or convenience. Even James's little coven of three was unusually large-and you saw how easily Sophiet left them. Our kind travel alone, or in pairs, as a rule. Chiaz's

family is the biggest in existence with one exception. The Ministry.

‘There were three of them originally, Aron, Caius, and Marcellus.’

‘I've seen them,’ I mumbled. ‘In the picture in Chiaz's study.’

Olivia nodded. ‘Two females joined them over time, and the five of them make up the family. I'm not sure, but I suspect that their age is what gives them the ability to live peacefully together. They are well over three thousand years old. Or it’s their gifts that give them extra tolerance. Like

Marcel and I, Aron and Marcellus are… talented.'

She continued before I could ask. 'Or maybe it's just their love of power that binds them together. Royalty is an apt description.'

'But if there are only five-'

'Five that make up the family,' she corrected. 'That doesn't include their guard.'

I took a deep breath. 'That sounds… serious.'

'Oh, it is,' she assured me. 'There were nine members of the guard

that were permanent, the last time we heard. Others are more… transitory. It changes. And many of them are gifted as well-with formidable gifts, gifts that make what I can do look like a parlor trick. The Ministry chose them for their abilities, physical or otherwise.'

I opened my mouth and then closed it. I didn't think I wanted to know how bad the odds were.

She nodded again as if she understood exactly what I was thinking. 'They don't get into too many confrontations. No one is stupid enough

to mess with them. They stay in their city, leaving only as duty calls.’

‘Duty?’ I wondered.

‘Didn't Marcel tell you what they do?’

‘No,’ I said, feeling the blank expression on my face.

Olivia looked over my head again, toward the businessperson, and put her wintry lips back to my ear.

‘There's a reason he called them royalty… the ruling class. Over the millennia, they have assumed the position of enforcing our rules-which

translates to punishing transgressors. They fulfill that duty decisively.'

My eyes popped wide with shock. 'There are rules?' I asked in a voice that was too loud.

Motivations…

'Got it!' he crowed. 'Another promise to keep.'

'What are you talking about?'

He let go of my hand and pointed toward the southern edge of the beach, where the flat, rocky half-moon dead-ended against the sheer sea cliffs. I stared, uncomprehending.

‘Didn't I promise to take you cliff diving?’

I shivered… strongly.

‘Yeah, it'll be pretty cold-not as cold as it is today. Can you feel the weather changing? The pressure? It will be warmer tomorrow. You up for it?’

The dark water did not look inviting, and, from this angle, the cliffs looked even higher than before.

Nonetheless, it had been days since I'd heard Marcel’s voice. That was part of the problem. I was addicted to the sound of my delusions. It made

things worse if I went too long without them. Jumping off a cliff was certain to remedy that situation.

‘Sure, I'm up for it. Fun.’

‘It's a date,’ he said and draped his arm around my shoulders.

‘Okay-now let's go get you some sleep.’ I didn't like the way the circles under his eyes were beginning to look permanently etched into his skin.

I woke early the next morning and snuck a change of clothes out to the truck. I had a feeling that Mr. Anderson would approve of today's plan

about as much as he would approve of the motorcycle.

The idea of a distraction from all my worries had me almost excited. It would be fun. A date with Marcel, a date with Marcel… I laughed darkly to myself. Maggie could say what he wanted about us being a messed-up pair- I was the one who was truly messed up. I made the werewolf seem downright normal.

I expected Marcel to meet me out front, the way he usually did when my noisy truck announced my arrival. When he didn't, I guessed that he might

still be sleeping. I would wait-let him to get as much rest as he could. He needed his sleep, and that would give the daytime to warm a bit more.

Maggie had been right about the weather, though; it had changed in the night. A thick layer of clouds pressed heavily on the atmosphere now, making it almost sultry; it was warm and close under the gray blanket. I left my sweater in the truck.

I knocked quietly on the door.

‘C'mon in, Bell,’ Billy said.

He was at the kitchen table, eating cold cereal.

‘Maggie sleeping?’

‘Err, no.’ He set his spoon down, and his eyebrows pulled together.

‘What happened?’ I demanded. I could tell from his expression that something had.

‘Embry, Jared, and Paul crossed a fresh trail early this morning. Sam and Maggie took off to help. Sam was hopeful- she's hedged herself in beside the mountains. He thinks they have a good chance to finish this.’ ‘Oh, no, Billy,’ I whispered. ‘Oh, no.’

He chuckled, deep and low. ‘Do you like La Push so well that you want to extend your sentence here?’

‘Don't make jokes, Billy. This is too scary for that.’

‘You're right,’ he agreed, still complacent. His ancient eyes were impossible to read. ‘This one's tricky.’ I bit my lip.

‘It's not as dangerous for them as you think it is. Sam knows what he's doing. You're the one that you should worry about. The angel doesn't want to fight them. She's just trying to find a way around them… to you.’

‘How does Sam know what he's doing?’ I demanded, brushing aside his concern for me. ‘They've only killed just the one angle that could have been lucky.’

‘We take what we do very seriously, Bell. Nothing's been forgotten. Everything they need to know has been passed down from father to son for generations.’

That didn't comfort me the way he intended it to. The memory of Maggie, wild, catlike, lethal, was too strong in my head. If she couldn't get

around the wolves, she would eventually try to go through them.

Billy went back to his breakfast; I sat down on the sofa and flipped aimlessly through the TV channels. That didn't last long. I started to feel closed in by the small room, claustrophobic, upset by the fact that I couldn't see out the curtained windows.

‘I'll be at the beach,’ I told Billy abruptly and hurried out the door.

Being outside didn't help as much as I'd hoped. The clouds pushed down with an invisible weight that kept the claustrophobia from easing. The

forest seemed strangely vacant as I walked toward the beach. I didn't see any animals-no birds, no squirrels. I couldn't hear any birds, either. The silence was eerie; there wasn't even the sound of wind in the trees.

I knew it was all just a product of the weather, but it still made me edgy. The heavy, warm pressure of the atmosphere was perceptible even to my weak human senses, and it hinted at something major in the storm department. A glance at the sky backed this up, the clouds were churning sluggishly despite the lack of breeze on

the ground. The closest clouds were a smoky gray, but between the cracks, I could see another layer that was a gruesome purple color. The skies had a ferocious plan in store for today. The animals must be bunkering down.

As soon as I reached the beach, I wished I hadn't come- I'd already had enough of this place. I'd been here every day, wandering alone. Was it so much different from my nightmares? But where else to go? I trudged down to the driftwood tree and sat at the end so that I could lean against the tangled roots. I stared up at the angry sky

broodingly, waiting for the first drops to break the stillness.

I tried not to think about the danger Marcel and his friends were in. Because nothing could happen to Marcel. The thought was unendurable. I'd lost too much already-would fate take the last few shreds of peace left behind? That seemed unfair, out of balance. But I’d violated some unknown rule, crossed some line that had condemned me. It was wrong to be so involved with myths and legends, to turn my back on the human world. Maybe…

No… Nothing would happen to Marcel. I had to believe that, or I wouldn't be able to function.

‘Argh!’ I groaned and jumped off the log. I couldn't sit still; it was worse than pacing.

I'd been counting on hearing Marcel this morning. It seemed like that was the one thing that might make it bearable to live through this day.

The hole had been festering lately like it was getting revenge for the times that Marcel’s presence had tamed it. The edges burned.

The waves picked up as I paced, beginning to crash against the rocks, but there was still no wind. I felt pinned down by the pressure of the storm. Everything swirled around me, but it was perfectly still where I stood. The air had a faint electric charge- I could feel the static in my hair.

Farther out, the waves were angrier than they were along the shore. I could see them battering against the line of the cliffs, spraying big white clouds of seafoam into the sky. There was still no movement in the air, though the clouds roiled more quickly

now. It was eerie looking like the clouds were moving by their own will. I shivered, though I knew it was just a trick of the pressure.

The cliffs were a black knife edge against the livid sky. Staring at them, I remembered the day Marcel had told me about Sam and his ‘gang.’ I thought of the boys-the werewolves-throwing themselves into the empty air.

The image of the falling, spiraling figures was still vivid in my mind. I imagined the utter freedom of the fall… I imagined the way Marcel’s voice would have sounded in my head

furious, velvet, perfect… The burning in my chest flared agonizingly.

There had to be some way to quench it. The pain was growing increasingly intolerable by the second. I glared at the cliffs and the crashing waves.

Well, why not? Why not quench it right now?

Marcel had promised me cliff diving, hadn't he? Just because he was unavailable, should I have to give up the distraction I needed so badly needed even worse because Marcel was out risking his life? Risking it for me.

If it weren’t for me, Maggie would not be killing people here… just somewhere else, far away. If anything happened to Marcel, it would be my fault. That realization stabbed deep and had me jogging back up to the road toward Billy's house, where my truck waited.

I knew my way to the lane that passed closest to the cliffs, but I had to hunt for the little path that would take me out to the ledge. As I followed it, I looked for turns or Pittsburgh, knowing that Maggie had planned to take me off the lower outcropping rather than the

top, but the path wound in a thin single line toward the brink with no options. I didn't have time to find another way down- the storm was moving in quickly now. The wind was finally beginning to touch me, the clouds pressing closer to the ground. Just as I reached the place where the dirt path fanned out into the stone precipice, the first drops broke through and splattered on my face.

It was not hard to convince myself that I didn't have time to search for another way- I wanted to jump from the top. This was the image that had

lingered in my head. I wanted the long fall that would feel like flying.

I knew that this was the stupidest, most reckless thing I had done yet. The thought made me smile. The pain was already easing as if my body knew that Marcel’s voice was just seconds away…

The ocean sounded very far away, somehow farther than before, when I was on the path in the trees. I grimaced when I thought of the probable temperature of the water. But I wasn't going to let that stop me.

The wind blew stronger now, whipping the rain into eddies around me.

I stepped out to the edge, keeping my eyes on the space in front of me. My toes felt ahead blindly, caressing the edge of the rock when they encountered it. I drew in a deep breath and held it… waiting. ‘Bell.’

I smiled and exhaled.

Yes? I didn't answer out loud, for fear that the sound of my voice would shatter the beautiful illusion. He sounded so real, so close. It was only when life was disapproving like this

that I could hear the true memory of his voice-the velvet texture and the musical intonation that made up the most perfect of all voices.

‘Don't do this,’ he pleaded.

You wanted me to be human, I reminded him. Well, watch me.

‘Please. For me.’

But you won't stay with me any other way.

‘Please.’ It was just a whisper in the blowing rain that tossed my hair and drenched my clothes-making me as

wet as if this were my second jump of the day.

I rolled up onto the balls of my feet.

‘No, Bell!’ He was angry now, and the anger was so lovely.

I smiled and raised my arms straight out, as if I were going to dive, lifting my face into the rain. But it was too ingrained from years of swimming at the public pool-feet first, the first time. I leaned forward, crouching to get more spring…

And I flung myself off the cliff.

Part: 15

Midair

I screamed as I dropped through the open air like a meteor, but it was a scream of exhilaration and not fear. The wind resisted, trying vainly to fight the unconquerable gravity, pushing against me, and twirling me in spirals like a rocket crashing to the earth.

Yes! The word echoed through my head as I sliced through the surface of the water. It was icy, colder than I'd

feared, and yet the chill only added to the high.

I was proud of myself as I plunged deeper into the freezing black water. I hadn't had one moment of terror-just pure adrenaline. The fall wasn't scary at all. Where was the challenge?

That was when the current caught me.

I'd been so preoccupied with the size of the cliffs, by the obvious danger of their high, sheer faces, that I hadn't worried at all about the dark water waiting. I never dreamed that the

true menace was lurking far below me, under the heaving surf.

It felt like the waves were fighting over me, jerking me back and forth between them as if determined to share by pulling me into halves. I knew the right way to avoid a riptide: swim parallel to the beach rather than struggling for the shore. But the knowledge did me little good when I didn't know which way the shore was.

I couldn't even tell which way the surface was.

The angry water was black in every direction; there was no

brightness to direct me upward. Gravity was all-powerful when it competed with the air, but it had nothing on the waves- I couldn't feel a downward pull, a sinking in any direction. Just the battering of the current that flung me round and round like a rag doll.

I fought to keep my breath in, to keep my lips locked around my last store of oxygen.

It didn't surprise me that my delusion of Marcel was there. He owed me that much, considering that I was dying. I was surprised by how sure that

knowledge was. I was going to drown. I was drowning.

‘Keep swimming!’ Marcel begged urgently in my head.

Where?

There was nothing but the darkness. There was no place to swim, I thought.

‘Stop that!’ He ordered. ‘Don't you dare give up!’

The cold of the water was numbing my arms and legs. I didn't feel the buffeting so much as before. It was

more of just dizziness now, a helpless spinning in the water.

But I listened to him. I forced my arms to continue reaching, my legs to kick harder, though every second I was facing a new direction. It couldn't be doing any good. What was the point? ‘Fight!’ he yelled. ‘Damn it, Bell, keep fighting.’

Why?

I didn't want to fight anymore. And it wasn't the light-headedness, or the cold, or the failure of my arms as the muscles gave out in exhaustion, that made me content to stay where I

was. I was almost happy that it was over. This was an easier death than others I'd faced. Oddly peaceful.

I thought briefly of the clichés, about how you were supposed to see your life flash before your eyes. I was so much luckier. Who wanted to see a rerun, anyway?

I saw him, and I had no will to fight. It was so clear, so much more defined than any memory.

My subconscious had stored Marcel away in flawless detail, saving him for this final moment. I could see his perfect face as if he were there, the

exact shade of his icy skin, the shape of his lips, the line of his jaw, the gold glinting in his furious eyes. He was angry, naturally, that I was giving up. His teeth were clenched, and his nostrils flared with rage.

‘No! Bell, no!’

My ears were flooded with the freezing water, but his voice was clearer than ever. I ignored his words and concentrated on the sound of his voice. Why would I fight when I was so happy where I was? Even as my lungs burned for more air and my legs cramped in the icy cold, I was content.

I'd forgotten what real happiness felt like.

Happiness. It made the whole dying thing bearable.

The current one at that moment, shoving me abruptly against something hard, a rock invisible in the gloom. It hit me solidly across the chest, slamming into me like an iron bar, and the breath whooshed out of my lungs, escaping in a thick cloud of silver bubbles. Water flooded down my throat, choking and burning. The iron bar seemed to be dragging me, pulling

me away from Marcel, deeper into the dark, to the ocean floor.

Goodbye, I love you, was my last thought.

PARIS AT THAT MOMENT, MY HEAD BROKE THE SURFACE.

How disorienting. I'd been sure I was sinking. The current wouldn't let up. It was slamming me against more rocks; they beat against the center of my back sharply, rhythmically, pushing the water from my lungs. It gushed out in amazing volume, absolute torrents pouring from my mouth and nose. The salt burned, and my lungs burned, and

my throat was too full of water to catch a breath and the rocks were hurting my back.

Somehow- I stayed in one place, though the waves still heaved around me. I couldn't see anything but water everywhere, reaching for my face.

‘Breath!’ A voice, wild with anxiety, ordered, and I felt a cruel stab of pain where I recognized the voice because it wasn't Marcel’s.

I could not obey. The waterfall pouring from my mouth didn't stop long enough for me to catch a breath. The

black, icy water filled my chest, burning.

The rock smacked into my back again, right between my shoulder blades, and another volley of water choked its way out of my lungs.

‘Breathe, Bell! C'mon!’ Marcel begged.

Black spots bloomed across my vision, getting wider and wider, blocking out the light.

The rock struck me again.

The rock wasn't cold like the water; it was hot on my skin. I realized

it was Marcel’s hand, trying to beat the water from my lungs. The iron bar that had dragged me from the sea was also… warm… My head whirled; the black spots covered everything…

Was I dying again, then? I didn't like it. This wasn't as good as the last time. It was only dark now, nothing worth looking at here. The sound of the crashing waves faded into the black and became a quiet, even whoosh that sounded like it was coming from the inside of my ears…

‘Bell?’ Marcel asked, his voice still tense, but not as wild as before. ‘Bells, honey, can you hear me?’

The contents of my head swished and rolled sickeningly like they'd joined the rough water…

‘How long has she been unconscious?’ Someone else asked.

The voice that was not Marcel’s shocked me, jarred me into a more focused awareness.

I realized that I was still. There was no tug of the current on me-the heaving was inside my head. The surface under me was flat and

motionless. It felt grainy against my bear arms.

‘I don't know,’ Marcel reported, still frantic. His voice was very close. Hands-so warm they had to be his- I brushed wet hair from my cheeks. ‘A few minutes? It didn't take long to tow her to the beach.’ The quiet whooshing inside my ears was not the waves-it was the air moving in and out of my lungs again. Each breath burned-the passageways were as raw as if I'd scrubbed them out with steel wool. But I was breathing.

And I was freezing. A thousand sharp, icy beads were striking my face and arms, making the cold worse.

‘She's breathing. She'll come around. We should get her out of the cold, though. I don't like the color she's turning…’ I recognized Sam's voice this time.

‘You think it's okay to move her?’

‘She didn't hurt her back or anything when she fell?’

‘I don't know.’

They hesitated.

I tried to open my eyes. It took me a minute, but then I could see the dark, purple clouds, flinging the freezing rain down at me. ‘Maggie?’ I croaked.

Marcel’s face blocked out the sky. ‘Oh!’ he gasped, relief washing over his features. His eyes were wet from the rain. ‘Oh, Bell! Are you okay? Can you hear me? Do you hurt anywhere?’

‘J-Just m-my throat,’ I stuttered, my lips quivering from the cold.

‘Let's get you out of here, then,’ Marcel said. He slid his arms under me and lifted me without effort- like picking up an empty box. His chest was bare and warm; he hunched his shoulders to keep the rain off me. My head lolled over his arm. I stared vacantly back toward the furious water, beating the sand behind him.

‘You got her?’ I heard Sam ask.

‘Yeah, I'll take it from here. Get back to the hospital. I'll join you later.

Thanks, Sam.’

My head was still rolling. None of his words sunk in at first. Sam didn't

answer. There was no sound, and I wondered if he were already gone.

The water licked and writhed up the sand after us as Marcel carried me away like it was angry that I'd escaped. As I stared wearily, a spark of color caught my unfocused eyes-a a small flash of fire was dancing on the black water, far out in the bay. The image made no sense, and I wondered how conscious I was.

My head swirled with the memory of the black, churning water of being so lost that I couldn't find up or down. So, lost… but somehow Marcel…

‘How did you find me?’ I rasped.

‘I was searching for you,’ he told me. He was half-jogging through the rain, up the beach toward the road. ‘I followed the tire tracks to your truck, and then I heard you scream…’ He shuddered. ‘Why would you jump, Bell? Didn't you notice that it's turning into a hurricane out here? Couldn't you have waited for me?’ Anger filled his tone as the relief faded.

‘Sorry,’ I muttered. ‘It was stupid.’

‘Yeah, it was really stupid,’ he agreed, drops of rain shaking free of his hair as he nodded. ‘Look, do you mind saving the stupid stuff for when I'm around? I won't be able to concentrate if I think you're jumping off cliffs behind my back.’

‘Sure,’ I agreed. ‘No problem.’ I sounded like a chain-smoker. I tried to clear my throat and then winced; the throat-clearing felt like stabbing a knife down there. ‘What happened today? Did you… find her?’ It was my turn to shudder, though I wasn't so cold here, right next to his ridiculous body heat.

Marcel shook his head. He was still more running than walking as he headed up the road to his house. ‘No. She took off into the water-the bloodsuckers have the advantage there. That's why I raced home- I was afraid she was going to double back swimming. You spend so much time on the beach…’ He trailed off, a catch in his throat.

‘Sam came back with you… is everyone else home, too?’ I hoped they weren’t still out searching for her.

‘Yeah. Sort of.’

I tried to read his expression, squinting into the hammering rain. His eyes were tight with worry or pain.

The words that hadn't made sense before suddenly did. ‘You said… hospital. Before, to Sam. Is someone hurt? Did she fight you?’ My voice jumped up an octave, sounding strange with the hoarseness.

Marcel’s eyes tightened again. ‘It doesn't look so great right now.’

Abruptly, I felt sick with guilt-felt truly horrible about the brainless cliff dive. Nobody needed to be

worrying about me right now. What a stupid time to be reckless.

‘What can I do?’ I asked.

At that moment the rain stopped. I hadn't realized we were already back at Marcel’s house until he walked through the door. The storm pounded against the roof.

‘You can stay here,’ Marcel said as he dumped me on the short couch. ‘I mean it right here I'll get you some dry clothes.’

I let my eyes adjust to the darkroom while Marcel banged around in his bedroom. The cramped front

room seemed so empty without Billy, almost desolate. It was strangely ominous-probably just because I knew where he was.

Marcel was back in seconds. He threw a pile of gray cotton at me. ‘These will be huge on you, but it's the best I've got. I'll-a, step outside so you can change.’

‘Don't go anywhere. I'm too tired to move yet. Just stay with me.’

Marcel sat on the floor next to me, his back against the couch. I wondered when he'd slept last. He looked as exhausted as I felt.

He leaned his head on the cushion next to mine and yawned. ‘Guess I could rest for a minute…’

His eyes closed. I let my slide shut, too.

Poor Harry. Poor Sue. I knew Mr. Anderson was going to be beside himself. Harry was one of his best friends. Despite Maggie's negative take on things, I hoped fervently that Harry would pull through. For Mr. Anderson’s sake. For Sue's and Leah's and Seth's…

Billy's sofa was right next to the radiator, and I was warm now, despite my soaked clothes. My lungs

ached in a way that pushed me toward unconsciousness rather than keeping me awake. I wondered vaguely if it was wrong to sleep… or was I getting drowned mixed up with concussions…? Marcel began softly snoring, and the sound of it soothed like a lullaby. I fell asleep quickly.

For the first time in a very long time, my dream was just a normal dream.

Just a blurred wandering through old memories-blinding bright visions of the Pa-sun, my mother's face, a ramshackle treehouse, a faded quilt,

a wall of mirrors, a flame on the black water… I forgot each of them as soon as the picture changed.

The last picture was the only one that stuck in my head. It was meaningless just a set on a stage. A balcony at night, a painted moon hanging in the sky. I watched the girl in her nightdress lean on the railing and talk to herself.

Meaningless… but when I slowly struggled back to consciousness, Juliet was on my mind.

Marcel was still asleep; he'd slumped down to the floor and his

breathing was deep and even. The house was darker now than before, it was black outside the window. I was stiff but warm and almost dry. The inside of my throat burned with every breath I took.

I was going to have to get up at least to get a drink. But my body just wanted to be-a here limp, to never move again. Instead of moving, I thought about Juliet some more.

I wondered what she would have done if Romeo had left her, not because he was banished, but because he lost interest. What if Rosalind had

given him the time of day, and he'd changed his mind? What if, instead of marrying Juliet, he'd just disappeared?

I thought I knew how Juliet would feel.

She wouldn't go back to her old life, not really. She wouldn't ever have moved on; I was sure of that. Even if she'd lived until she was old and gray, every time she closed her eyes, it would have been Romeo's face she saw behind her lids.

She would have accepted that, eventually.

I wondered if she would have married Paris in the end, just to please her parents, to keep the peace. No, not, I decided. But then, the story didn't say much about Paris. He was just a stick figure-a placeholder, a threat, a deadline to force her hand.

What if there were more to Paris?

What if Paris had been Juliet's friend? Her very best friend? What if he was the only one, she could confide in about the whole devastating thing with Romeo? The one person who understood her and made her feel

halfway human again? What if he was patient and kind? What if he took care of her? What if Juliet knew she couldn't survive without him? What if he loved her, and wanted her to be happy?

And… What if she loved Paris? Not like Romeo. Nothing like that, of course. But enough that she wanted him to be happy, too?

Marcel’s slow, deep breathing was the only sound in the room-like a lullaby hummed to a child, like the whisper of a rocking chair, like the ticking of an old clock when you had

nowhere you needed to go…It was the sound of comfort.

If Romeo was gone, never coming back, would it have mattered whether Juliet had taken Paris up on his offer? She should have tried to settle into the leftover scraps of life that were left behind. That would have been as close to happiness as she could get.

I sighed and then groaned when the sigh scraped my throat. I was reading too much into the story.

Romeo wouldn't change his mind. That's why people still

remembered his name, always twined with hers: Romeo and Juliet. That's why it was a delightful story.

'Juliet gets dumped and ends up with Paris' would have never been a hit.

I closed my eyes and drifted again, letting my mind wander away from the stupid play I didn't want to think about anymore. I thought about reality instead of jumping off the cliff and what a brainless mistake that had been. And not just the cliff, but the motorcycles and the whole irresponsible Evil Knievel bit. What if

something bad happened to me? What would that do to Mr. Anderson? Harry's heart attack had pushed everything suddenly into perspective for me. The perspective that I didn't want to see because if I admitted to the truth of it-it would mean that I would have to change my ways. Could I live like that?

Maybe… It wouldn't be easy; in fact, it would be downright miserable to give up my hallucinations and try to be a grown-up. But I should do it. And I could. If I had Marcel.

I couldn't make that decision right now. It hurt too much. I'd think about something else.

Images from my ill-considered afternoon stunt rolled through my head while I tried to come up with something pleasant to think about… the feel of the air as I feel, the blackness of the water, the thrashing of the current… Marcel’s face… I lingered there for a long time. Marcel’s warm hands, trying to beat life back into me… the stinging rain flung down by the purple clouds… the strange fire on the waves…

There was something familiar about that flash of color on top of the water. Of course, it couldn't be fire-

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car squelching through the mud on the road outside. I heard it stop in front of the house, and doors started opening and closing. I thought about sitting up and then decided against that idea.

Billy's voice was easily identifiable, but he kept it uncharacteristically low so that it was only a gravelly grumble.

The door opened, and the light flicked on. I blinked, momentarily blind.

Maggie startled awake, gasping, and jumping to his feet.

‘Sorry,’ Billy grunted. ‘Did we wake you?’

My eyes slowly focused on his face, and then, as I could read his expression, they filled with tears.

‘Oh, no, Billy!’ I moaned.

He nodded slowly, his expression hard with grief. Maggie hurried to his father and took one of his hands. The pain made his face suddenly

childlike-it looked odd on top of the man's body.

Sam was right behind Billy, pushing his chair through the door. His normal composure was absent from his agonized face.

‘I'm so sorry,’ I whispered.

Billy nodded. ‘It's going to be hard all around.’

‘Where's Mr. Anderson?’

‘Your dad is still at the hospital with Sue. There are a lot of… arrangements to be made.’

I swallowed hard.

‘I'd better get back there,’ Sam mumbled, and he ducked hastily out the door.

Billy pulled his hand away from Marcel, and then he rolled himself through the kitchen toward his room.

Maggie stared after him for a minute, then came to sit on the floor beside me again. He put his face in his hands. I rubbed his shoulder, wishing I could think of anything to say.

After a long moment, Marcel caught my hand and held it to his face.

‘How are you feeling? Are you okay? I probably should have taken you to a doctor or something.’ He sighed.

‘Don't worry about me,’ I croaked.

He twisted his head to look at me. His eyes were rimmed in red. ‘You don't look so good.’

‘I don't feel so good, either, I guess.’

‘I'll go get your truck and then take you home-you probably ought to be there when Mr. Anderson gets back.’

‘Right…’

I lay listlessly on the sofa while I waited for him. Billy was silent in the other room. I felt like a peeping torn, peering through the cracks at a private sorrow that wasn't mine.

It didn't take Maggie long. The roar of my truck's engine broke the silence before I expected it. He helped me up from the couch without speaking, keeping his arm around my shoulder when the chilly air outside made me shiver. He took the driver's seat without asking, and then pulled me next to his side to keep his arm tight

around me. I leaned my head against his chest.

‘How will you get home?’ I asked.

‘I'm not going home. We still haven't caught the bloodsucker, remember?’ My next shudder had nothing to do with the cold.

It was a quiet ride after that. The chilly air had woken me up. My mind was alert, and it was working very hard and very fast.

What if? What was the right thing to do?

I couldn't imagine my life without Marcel now-I cringed away from the idea of even trying to imagine that. Somehow, he'd become essential to my survival.

But to leave things the way they were… was that cruel, as Lance had accused?

I remembered wishing that Marcel was my brother. I realized now that all I wanted to be a claim on him. It didn't feel brotherly when he held me like this. It just felt nice-warm and comforting and familiar. Safe. Marcel was a safe harbor.

I could stake a claim. I had that much in my power.

I'd have to tell him everything, I knew that. It was the only way to be fair. I'd have to explain it right so that he'd know I wasn't settling, that he was much too good for me. He already knew I was broken, that part wouldn't surprise him, but he'd need to know the extent of it. I'd even have to admit that I was crazy-explain about the voices I heard. He'd need to know everything before he decided.

But even as I recognized that necessity, I knew he would take me

despite it all. He wouldn't even pause to think it through. I would have to commit to this-commit as much of me as there was left, every one of the broken pieces. It was the only way to be fair to him. Would I?

Could I?

Would it be so wrong to try to make Marcel happy? Even if the love I felt for him was no more than a weak echo of what I was capable of, even if my heart was far away, wandering and grieving after my fickle Romeo, would it be so very wrong?

Marcel stopped the truck in front of my spooky house, cutting the engine so it was suddenly silent. Like so many other times, he seemed to be in tune with my thoughts now.

He threw his other arm around me, crushing me against his chest, binding me to him. Again, this felt nice. Like being a whole person again.

I thought he would be thinking of Harry, but then he spoke, and his tone was apologetic. ‘Sorry. I know you don't feel exactly the way I do, Bell. I swear I don't mind. I'm just so glad you're okay that I could sing and that's

something no one wants to hear.’ He laughed his throaty laugh in my ear.

My breathing kicked up a notch, sanding the walls of my throat.

Wouldn't Marcel, indifferent as he might be, want me to be as happy as possible under the circumstances? Wouldn't enough friendly emotion linger for him to want that much for me? I thought he would. He wouldn't begrudge me this: giving just a small bit of love he didn't want to my friend Marcel. It wasn't the same love at all.

Maggie pressed his warm cheek against the top of my hair.

If I turned my face to the side-if I pressed my lips against his bare shoulder… I knew without any doubt what would follow. It would be very easy. There would be no need for explanations tonight.

But could I, do it? Could I betray my absent heart to save my pathetic life? Butterflies assaulted my stomach as I thought of turning my head.

And then, as clearly as if I were in immediate danger, Marcel’s velvet voice whispered in my ear.

‘Be happy,’ he told me.

I froze… to that look…

Marcel felt me stiffen and released me automatically, reaching for the door.

Wait, I wanted to say. Just a minute… But I was still locked in place, listening to the echo of Marcel's voice in my head.

Storm-cooled air blew through the cab of the truck.

'OH!' The breath whooshed out of Marcel like someone had punched him in the gut. 'Holy crap!'

He slammed the door and twisted the keys in the ignition at the same moment. His hands were shaking so hard I didn't know how he managed it.

‘What's wrong?’

He revved the engine too fast; it sputtered and faltered.

‘Fallen Angel,’ he spits out.

The blood rushed from my head and left me dizzy. ‘How do you know?’

‘Because I can smell it. Damn it!’

Marcel’s eyes were wild, raking the dark street. He barely seemed aware of the tremors that were rolling through his body. ‘Phase or get her out of here?’ he hissed at himself.

He looked down at me for a split second, taking in my horror-struck eyes and white face, and then he was scanning the street again.

‘Right. Get you out.’

The engine caught with a roar. The tires squealed as he spun the truck around, turning toward our only escape. The headlights washed across the pavement, lit the front line of the

black forest, and finally glinted off a car parked across the street from my house.

‘Stop!’ I gasped.

It was a black car a car I knew. I might be the furthest thing from an audiophile, but I could tell you everything about that car. It was a Mercedes S 55 AMG. I knew the horsepower and the color of the interior. I knew the feel of the powerful engine purring through the frame. I knew the rich smell of the leather seats and the way the extra-dark tint made

noon look like dusk through those windows.

It was Chiaz's car.

‘Stop!’ I cried again, louder this time because Marcel was gunning the truck down the street.

‘What?’

‘It's not Maggie. Stop, stop! I want to go back.’

He stomped on the brake so hard I had to catch myself against the dashboard.

‘What?’ he asked again, aghast. He stared at me with horror in his eyes.

‘It's Chiaz's car! It's Barns. I know it.’

He watched dawn break across my face, and a violent tremor rocked his frame.

‘Hey, calm down, Maggie. It's okay. No danger, see? Relax.’

‘Yeah, calm,’ he panted, putting his head down and closing his eyes. While he concentrated on not exploding into a wolf, I started out the back window at the black car.

It was just Chiaz, I told myself. Don't expect anything more. Esme… Stop right there, I told myself. Just

Chiaz. That was plenty. More than I'd ever hoped to have again.

‘There's an angel in your house,’ Marcel hissed. ‘And you want to go back?’

I glanced at him, ripping my unwilling eyes off the Mercedes-terrified that it would disappear the second I looked away.

‘Of course,’ I said, my voice blank with surprise at his question. Of course, I wanted to go back.

Marcel’s face hardened while I stared at him, congealing into the bitter mask that I'd thought was gone for

good. Just before he had the mask in place, I caught the spasm of betrayal that flashed in his eyes. His hands were still shaking. He looked ten years older than me.

He took a deep breath. ‘You're sure it's not a trick?’ he asked in a slow, heavy voice.

‘It's not a trick. It's from Chiaz. Take me back!’

A shudder rippled through his wide shoulders, but his eyes were flat and emotionless.

‘No.’

‘Maggie, it's okay-’

‘No. Take yourself back, Bell.’ His voice was a slap- I flinched as the sound of it struck me. His jaw clenched and unclenched.

‘Look, Bell,’ he said in the same hard voice. ‘I can't go back. Treaty or no treaty, that's my enemy in there.’

‘It's not like that-’

‘I have to tell Sam right away. This changes things. We can't be caught on their territory.’ ‘Maggie, it's not a war!’

He didn't listen. He put the truck in neutral and jumped out the door, leaving it running.

‘Bye, bell,’ he called back over his shoulder. ‘I hope you don't die.’ He sprinted into the darkness, shaking so hard that his shape seemed blurred; he disappeared before I could open my mouth to call him back.

Remorse pinned me against the seat for one long second. What had I just done to Marcel?'

But Remorse couldn't hold me very long.

I slid across the seat and put the truck back in drive. My hands were shaking as hard as Maggie's had been, and this took a minute of concentration. Then I carefully turned the truck around and drove it back to my house.

It was very dark when I turned off the headlights. Mr. Anderson had left in such a hurry that he'd forgotten to leave the porch lamp on. I felt a pang of doubt, staring at the house, deep in shadow. What if it was a trick?

I looked back at the black car, almost invisible in the night. No, I knew that car.

Still, my hands were shaking even worse than before as I reached for the key above the door. When I grabbed the doorknob to unlock it, it twisted easily under my hand. I let the door fall open. The hallway was black.

I wanted to call out a greeting, but my throat was too dry. I couldn't quite seem to catch my breath.

I took a step inside and fumbled for the light switch. It was so black-like the black water… Where was that switch?

Just like the black water, with the orange flame flickering impossibly

on top of it. The flame that couldn't be a fire, but what then…? My fingers traced the wall, still searching, still shaking- suddenly, something Marcel had told me this afternoon echoed in my head, finally sinking in… She took off into the water, he'd said. The bloodsuckers have the advantage there. That's why I raced home -I was afraid she was going to double back swimming.

My hand froze in its searching, my whole body froze into place, as I realized why I recognized the strange orange color of the water.

Maggie's hair, blowing wild in the wind, the color of fire…

She'd been right there. Right there in the harbor with me and Marcel. If Sam hadn't been there if it had been just the two of us…? I couldn't breathe or move. The light flicked on, though my frozen hand had still not found the switch.

I blinked at the sudden light and saw that someone was there, waiting for me.

VISITOR UNNATURALLY STILL AND WHITE, WITH LARGE BLACK EYES intent on my face, my

visitor waited perfectly motionless in the center of the halt, beautiful beyond imagining.

My knees trembled for a second, and I nearly fell. Then I hurled myself at her.

‘Olivia, oh, Olivia!’ I cried as I slammed into her.

I'd forgotten how hard she was; it was like running headlong into a wall of cement.

‘Bell?’ There was a strange mingling of relief and confusion in her voice.

I locked my arms around her, gasping to inhale as much of the scent of her skin as possible. It wasn't like anything else-not floral or spice, citrus, and musk. No perfume in the world could compare. My memory hadn't done it justice.

I didn't notice when the gasping turned into something else-I only realized I was sobbing when Olivia dragged me to the living room couch and pulled me into her lap. It was like curling up into a cool stone, but a stone that was contoured comfortingly to the shape of my body. She rubbed my back

in a gentle rhythm, waiting for me to get control of myself.

‘I'm… sorry,’ I blubbered. ‘I'm just… so happy… to see you!’

‘It's okay, Bell. Everything's okay.’

‘Yes,’ I bawled. And, for once, it seemed that way.

Olivia sighed. ‘I'd forgotten how exuberant you are,’ she said, and her tone was disapproving.

I looked up at her through my streaming eyes. Olivia's neck was tight, straining away from me, her lips

pressed together firmly. Her eyes were black as pitch.

‘Oh,’ I puffed, as I realized the problem. She was thirsty. And I smelled appetizing. It had been a while since I'd had to think about that.

‘Sorry.’

‘It's my fault. It's been too long since I hunted. I shouldn't let myself get so thirsty. But I was in a hurry today.’ The look she directed at me then was a glare. ‘Speaking of which, would you like to explain to me how you're alive?’

That brought me up short and stopped the sobs. I realized what must have happened immediately, and why Olivia was here.

I swallowed loudly, ‘you saw me fall.’

‘No,’ she disagreed, her eyes narrowing. ‘I saw you jump.’

I pursed my lips as I tried to think of an explanation that wouldn't sound nuts.

Olivia shook her head. ‘I told him this would happen, but he didn't believe me. 'Karly promised,' ‘her voice imitated him so perfectly that I froze in

shock while the pain ripped through my torso. ‘'Don't be looking for her future, either,' ‘she continued to quote him.' ‘We've done enough damage.’

‘But just because I'm not looking, doesn't mean I don't see’ she went on. ‘I wasn't tracking you, I swear, Bell. It's just that I'm already attuned to you… when I saw you jumping, I didn't think, I just got on a plane. I knew I would be too late, but I couldn't do anything. And then I get here, thinking I could help Mr. Anderson somehow, and you drive up.’ She shook her head, this time in

confusion. Her voice was strained. ‘I saw you go into the water and I waited and waited for you to come up, but you didn't. What happened? And how could you do that to Mr. Anderson? Did you stop to think about what this would do to him? And my brother?

Do you have any idea what Marcel?

I cut her off then, as soon as she said his name. I'd let her go on, even after I realized the misunderstanding she was under, just to hear the perfect bell tone of her voice. But it was time to interrupt.

‘Olivia, I wasn't committing suicide.’

She eyed me dubiously. ‘Are you saying you didn't jump off a cliff?’

‘No, but…’ I grimaced. ‘It was for recreational purposes only.’ Her expression hardened.

‘I'd seen some of Marcel’s friend’s cliff diving,’ I insisted. ‘It looked like… fun, and I was bored…’ She waited.

‘I didn't think about how the storm would affect the currents. I didn't think about the water much at all.’

Olivia didn't buy it. I could see that she still thought I had been trying to kill myself. I decided to redirect. ‘So, if you saw me go in, why didn't you see Marcel?’

She cocked her head to the side, distracted.

I continued. ‘It's true that I probably would have drowned if Marcel hadn't jumped in after me. Well, okay, there's not about it. But he did, and he pulled me out, and I guess he towed me back to shore, though I was kind of out for that part. It couldn't have been more than a minute that I was under

before he grabbed me. How come you didn't see that?’

Part: 16

Acting of us-

You got to love the p*ssy fart vid- I do!

His eyes bulged, and his face turned a strange, sallow color under the tan exterior. He looked like he was about to be sick. Marcel noticed because he held the hand I moved. ‘Whatever's that I ponder with suspicion?’ He traded hands, examining my right. ‘This is your funny scare, the

cold one.’ He looked at it closer, with new eyes, and gasped.

‘Naturally, it's what you think it is,’ I whispered. Love isn't something you find. Love is something that finds you. ‘He kissed me so hot, startlingly, and tastefully.’

Let us always meet each other with a smile, for the smile is the start of love. Keep love in your heart. A life without it is like a sunless garden when the flowers are dead. Love is composed of a solo soul inhabiting two bodies. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have treasured you, so

your commitment to fall in love with one another.

True love is like ghosts, which everyone talks about and few have seen. You can't blame gravity for falling in love. Immature love says: I love you because I need you. Mature love says 'I need you because I love you. Love finds each other that has caught fire as no other can do. It is quite sympathetic, conjoint self-assurance, distribution, and forgiving. It is faithfulness through good and wicked eras. It settles for less than faultlessness and makes pin money for human weaknesses.

Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye. The best thing to hold onto in life is each other. Love is life. And if you miss love, you miss life.

‘Definitely- not.’ I said curtly. I couldn't imagine the wolves running faster than an angel. When the Barn’s ran, they all but turned invisible with speed. ‘As a result, tell me something I don't know,’ he said. ‘Something about angels. How did you stand it, being around them? Didn't it creep you out?’ I have never found anybody who could stand to accept the daily demonstrative love I feel in me and give back as good

as I give. Love is when the other person's happiness is more important than your own.

It did mean something to me. My tone made him thoughtful for a moment.

‘Say, why would your bloodsucker kill that James, anyway?’ He asked suddenly. ‘He was trying to kill me I feel maybe not all the way yet some shit like that- it was like a game for him. He lost. Do you remember last spring when I was in Kennywood at night?’

‘But if he kissed you…?

‘Shouldn't you be… dating someone else?’

(Jenny never wanted this; she wanted him more than what they thought.)

He choked. Of any kind, you happen to be feeling the twinkling is fine with them. That's what real love amounts to letting an individual be what he is. In-Lovers- can help each other. A loyal friend is nobody who lets you have total freedom to be yourself- as well as particularly to sense, or, nonsense. Love like a rose flower

cannot blossom without sunshine, and man cannot live without love.

‘Marcel saved me twice from falling for someone, not for me, I feel that.’ I believed. ‘He sucked the kiss out of me here and there- you know, like with a never before.’ I twitched as the pain lashed around the edges of the hole. The sweetest of all sounds is that of the voice of the woman we love. But I wasn't the only one twitching. I could feel Marcel’s whole body trembling next to mine. I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than the times gone by.

Those dreams are more prevailing than facts. That always hopes for victories over experience. That laughter is the only cure for sorrow. And I believe that love is stronger than death. Existence deeply loved by someone gives you métier, while loving somebody severely gives you nerve.

~*~

In the car on the speed drive:

Even the car shook.

‘At least we have each other,’ he said, clearly comforted by the thought.

I was comforted, too. ‘At least there's that,’ I agreed.

And when we were together, it was fine. But Marcel had a horrible, dangerous job he felt compelled to do, and so I was often alone, stuck in snubber for safety, with nothing to do to keep my mind off any of my worries. I felt awkward, always taking up space at Marcel’s. I did some studying for another life test that was coming up next week, but I could only look at the math for so long.

When I didn't have anything obvious to do in my hands, spread love

everywhere you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier. I felt like I ought to be making conversation with Marcel under the pressure of normal societal rules. But Marcel wasn't one for filling up the long silences, and so the awkwardness continued. Oh like- stolen kisses are always sweetest and are the best ones I can have!

She criticized lightly about the increase in the boy’s cravings from all their extra successively, but it was easy to see she didn't mind taking care of them. It wasn't hard to be with her; we

were both wolf girls now. I tried hanging out at Maggie's place afternoon night, for a change and more than only girls can do for girls. At first, it was nice.

Maggie was cheerful sitting still lusting for me. I go with the flow behind her while she flits around her little house and yard, scrubbing at the spotless floor, fixing a broken hinge, pulling a tiny weed, tugging a string of fabric through an antique loom, and always cooking, too. A kiss is a lovely trick designed by nature to stop speech when words become unnecessary.

Kindness in words creates confidence. Sympathy in thinking creates a degree. Kindheartedness in giving creates in-love with lovers, or so I feel like this day.

But Sam checked in after I would be there for a few hours. I only stayed long enough to make certain that Marcel was fine and there was no news, and then

I had to discharge, like she. ‘It’s not always pretty- yet that is love.’ The aura of love and contentment that surrounded them was harder to take in

concentrated doses, with no one else around to thin it like this.

Love doesn't make the world go around. Love is what makes the ride meaningful. So that left me wandering the beach, pacing the length of the rock-strewn crescent back and forth, repeatedly, and more, and so on.

Sh*t! You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love, and fondness than you are physical wants and needs, in addition to that person not to be found anywhere. You physically, as much as any person

in the entire cosmos deserve your love and affection.

Alone time wasn't good for me. Thanks to the new honesty with Marcel, I'd been talking and thinking about the Barn’s way too much. I have decided to stick with love. Detestation is too great a weight to tolerate. On the other hand, heat is easier for some, don’t you see that?

No matter how I tried to distract myself and I had plenty to think of: I was honestly and desperately worried about Marcel- I was getting in deeper and deeper with Marcel without

ever having consciously decided to progress in that direction and I didn't know what to do about it-none of these very real, very deserving of thought, very pressing concerns could take my mind off the pain in my chest for long. At the end of the day, I couldn't even walk to any further extent, because I couldn't breathe. I sat down on a patch of semi-dry rocks and curled up in a ball. We love life, not because we are used to living but because we are used to loving.

His warmth made me tremble, but at least I could breathe with him

there. ‘I'm adulterating your spring break,’ Marcel suspects himself as we walk back up the shore. ‘On no account, you are not. I didn't have any plans. I don't think I like spring disruptions, anyway.’ A teen girl knows the face of the man she loves as a seafarer knows the open sea. Marcel found me like that, and I could tell from his expression that he understood. ‘Sorry,’ he said right away. He pulled me up from the ground and wrapped both arms around my shoulders. I hadn't realized that I was cold until then.

~*~

Marcel is so cute- saying:

Boob play- is like wax on and wax off.

~*~

Vagina play- is like painting the fence.

~*~

Clitoris play- is like nipples- would be sand the floor.

~*~

Butt play of hers- is like side by side.

~*~

just think of this and it’s all good! And you can touch a girl well!

~*~

Piss the day started, and I am in bed- messed up in the head- God- GOO!

‘I'll take tomorrow morning off. The others can run without me. We'll do something fun. ‘Fun is exactly what you need. Hammam…’ he gazed out across the heaving ashen waves, deliberating. As his eyes glanced at the skyline, he had a flash of the stimulus.’ The word seemed out of place in my life

right now, barely comprehensible, bizarre.

‘Fun? Is it not?’

Part: 17

Silence

‘Sh-h!’

‘Shouldn't somebody has mentioned this to me earlier?’ I whispered angrily. ‘I mean, I wanted to be a… to be one of you! Shouldn't somebody have, already like explained the rules to me?’

Olivia chuckled once at my reaction. ‘It's not that complicated, Bell. There's only one core restriction- and if you think about it, you can probably figure it out for yourself.’

I thought about it. ‘Nope, I have no idea.’

She shook her head, disappointed. ‘Maybe it's too obvious. We just have to keep our existence a secret.’

‘Oh,’ I mumbled. It was obvious.

‘It makes sense, and most of us don't need policing,’ she continued.

‘But, after a few centuries, sometimes one of us gets bored. Or crazy. I don’t know. And then the Ministry steps in before it can compromise them, or the rest of us.’

‘So-o Marcel…’

‘Is planning to flout that in their city-the city they've secretly held for three thousand years, since the time of the Etruscans. They are so protective of their city that they don't allow hunting within its walls. Volterra is probably the safest city in the world-from angel attack at the very least.’

‘But you said they didn't leave. How do they eat?’

This is what she becomes because of me… what do you think of here… do you like her or heat? Are you going to hate her for this?

~*~

‘They don't leave. They bring in their food from the outside, from quite far away sometimes. It gives their guard something to do when they're not out annihilating mavericks. Or protecting Volterra from exposure…’

‘From situations like this one, like Marcel,’ I finished her sentence. It

was amazingly easy to say his name now. I wasn't sure what the difference was. Maybe because- I wasn't planning on living much longer without seeing him. Or at all, if we were too late. It was comforting to know that I would have an easy out.

‘I doubt they've ever had a situation quite like this,’ she muttered, disgusted.

‘You don't get a lot of suicidal angels.’

The sound that escaped out of my mouth was very quiet, but Olivia seemed to understand that it was a cry

of pain. She wrapped her thin, strong arm around my shoulders.

‘We'll do what we can, Bell. It's not over yet.’

‘Not yet.’ I let her comfort me, though I knew she thought our chances were poor. ‘And the Ministry will get us if we mess up.’ Olivia stiffened. ‘You say that like it's a good thing.’

I shrugged.

‘Knock it off, Bell, or we're turning around in New York and going back to Pittsburgh.’

‘What?’

‘You know what. If we're too late for Marcel, I'm going to do me damnedest to get you back to Mr. Anderson, and I don't want any trouble from you. Do you understand that?’

‘Sure, Olivia.’

She pulled back slightly so that she would glare at me. ‘No trouble.’

‘Scout's honor,’ I muttered.

She rolled her eyes.

‘Let me concentrate, now. I'm trying to see what he's planning.’

She left her arm around me, but let her head fall back against the

seat and closed her eyes. She pressed her free hand to the side of her face, rubbing her fingertips against her temple.

I watched her in fascination for a long time. Eventually, she became utterly motionless, her face like a stone sculpture. The minutes passed, and if I didn't know better, I would have thought she'd fallen asleep. I didn't dare interrupt her to ask what was going on.

I wished there was something safe for me to think about. I couldn't allow myself to consider the horrors we

were headed toward, or, more horrific yet, the chance that we might fail-not if I wanted to keep from screaming aloud.

I couldn't anticipate anything, either. If I were very, very, very lucky, I would somehow be able to save Marcel. But I wasn't so stupid as to think that saving him would mean that I could stay with him. I was no different, no more special than I'd been before. There would be no new reason for him to want me now. Seeing him and losing him again…

I fought back against the pain. This was the price I had to pay to save his life. I would pay for it.

They showed a movie, and my neighbor got headphones. Sometimes, I watched the figures moving across the little screen, but I couldn't even tell if the movie was supposed to be a romance or a horror film.

After an eternity, the plane began to descend toward New York City. Olivia remained in her trance. I dithered, reaching out to touch her, only to pull my hand back again. This happened a dozen times before the

plane touched down with a jarring impact.

‘Olivia,’ I finally said. ‘Olivia, we have to go.’

I touched her arm.

Her eyes came open very slowly. She shook her head from side to side for a moment.

‘Anything new?’ I asked in a faint voice, conscious of the man listening on the other side of me.

‘Not exactly,’ she breathed in a voice I could barely catch. ‘He's getting

closer. He's deciding how he's going to ask.’

We had to run for our connection, but that was good-better than having to wait. As soon as the plane was in the air, Olivia closed her eyes and slid back into the same stupor as before. I waited as patiently as I could. When it was dark again, I opened the window to stare out into the flat black that was no better than the window shade.

I was grateful that I'd had so many months' practice with controlling my thoughts. Instead of dwelling on the

terrifying possibilities that, no matter what Olivia said I did not intend to survive, I concentrated on lesser problems. Like, what I was going to say to Mr. Anderson if I got back:' That was a thorny enough problem to occupy several hours, and Marcel?

He had promised to wait for me, but did that promise still apply? Would I end up home alone in Pittsburgh, with no one at all? I didn't want to survive, no matter what happened.

It felt like seconds later when Olivia shook my shoulder-I hadn't realized I'd fallen asleep.

‘Bell,’ she hissed, her voice a little too loud in the darkened cabin full of sleeping humans.

I wasn't disoriented-I hadn't been out long enough for that.

‘What's wrong?’

Olivia's eyes gleamed in the dim light of a reading lamp in the row behind us.

‘It's not wrong.’ She smiled fiercely. ‘It's right. They're deliberating, but they've decided to tell him no.’

‘The Ministry?’ I muttered, groggy.

‘Of course, Bell, keep up. I can see what they're going to say.’

‘Tell me.’

An attendant tiptoed down the aisle to us. ‘Can I get you, ladies, a pillow?’ His hushed whisper was a rebuke to our comparatively loud conversation.

‘No, thank you.’ Olivia beamed at him; her smile shockingly lovely.

The attendant's expression was dazed as he turned and stumbled his way back.

‘Tell me,’ I breathed silently.

She whispered into my ear. ‘They're interested in him-they think his talent could be useful. They're going to offer him a place with them.’

‘What will he say?’

‘I can't see that yet, but I'll bet it's colorful.’ She grinned again. ‘This is the first good news-the first break.

They're intrigued; they truly don't want to destroy him-wasteful,' that's the word Aron will use-and that may be enough to force him to get creative. The longer he spends on his plans, the better for us.’

It wasn't enough to make me hopeful, to make me feel the relief she felt. There were still so many ways that we could be too late. And if I didn't get through the walls into the Ministry city, I wouldn't be able to stop Olivia from dragging me back home.

‘Olivia?’

‘What?’

‘I'm confused. How are you seeing this so clearly? And then other times, you see things far away that don't happen?’

Her eyes tightened. I wondered if she guessed what I was thinking of.

‘It's clear because it's immediate and close, and I'm concentrating. The faraway things that come on their own-those are just glimpses, faint. Plus, I see my kind more easily than yours. Marcel is even easier because I'm so attuned to him.’

‘You see me sometimes,’ I reminded her.

She shook her head. ‘Not as clear.’

I sighed. ‘I wish you could have been right about me. In the beginning, when you first saw things about me, before we even met…’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You saw me become one of you.’ I barely mouthed the words.

She sighed. ‘It was a possibility at the time.’

‘At the time,’ I repeated.

‘Actually, Bell…’ She hesitated, and then seemed to make a choice.

‘Honestly, I think it's all gotten beyond ridiculous. I'm debating whether to just change you myself.’

I stared at her, frozen with shock. Instantly, my mind resisted her words. I couldn't afford that kind of hope if she changed her mind.

‘Did I scare you?’ she wondered. ‘I thought that's what you wanted.’

‘I do!’ I gasped. ‘Oh, Olivia, do it now! I could help you so much and I wouldn't slow you down. Bite me!’

‘Shh,’ she cautioned. The attendant was looking in our direction

again. ‘Try to be reasonable,’ she whispered. ‘We don't have enough time. We must get into Volterra tomorrow. You'd be writhing in pain for days.’ She made a face. ‘And I don't think the other passengers would react well.’

I bit my lip, ‘If you don't do it now, you'll change your mind.’

‘No.’ She frowned- her expression unhappy. ‘I don't think I will. He'll be furious, but what will he be able to do about it?’

My heart beat faster. ‘Nothing at all.’

She laughed quietly and then sighed. ‘You have too much faith in me, Bell. I'm not sure that I can. I'll probably just end up killing you.’

‘I'll take my chances.’

‘You are so bizarre, even for a human.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Oh well, this is purely hypothetical at this point, anyway. First, we have to live through tomorrow.’

‘Good point.’ But at least I had something to hope for if we did. If

Olivia made good on her promise-and if she didn't kill me-then Marcel could run after his distractions all he wanted, and I could follow. I wouldn't let him be distracted.

When I was beautiful and strong, he wouldn't want distractions.

‘Go back to sleep,’ she encouraged me. ‘I'll wake you up when there's something new.’

‘Right,’ I grumbled, certain that sleep was a lost cause now. Olivia pulled her legs up on the seat, wrapping her arms around them and leaning her forehead against her knees.

She rocked back and forth as she concentrated.

I rested my head against the seat, watching her, and the next thing I knew, she was snapping the shade closed against the faint brightening in the eastern sky.

‘What's happening?’ I mumbled.

‘They've told him no,’ she said quietly. I noticed at once that her enthusiasm was gone.

My voice choked in my throat with panic. ‘What's he going to do?’

‘It was chaotic at first. I was only getting flickers; he was changing plans so quickly.’

‘What kinds of plans?’ I pressed.

‘There was a bad hour,’ she whispered. ‘He'd decided to go hunting.’ She looked at me, seeing the comprehension on my face.

‘In the city,’ she explained. ‘It got very close. He changed his mind at the last minute.’

‘He wouldn't want to disappoint Chiaz,’ I mumbled. Not at the end. ‘Probably,’ she agreed.

‘Will there be enough time?’ As I spoke, there was a shift in the cabin pressure. I could feel the plane angling downward.

‘I'm hoping so-if he sticks to his latest decision, maybe.’

‘What is that?’

‘He's going to keep it simple. He's just going to walk out into the sun.’

Just walk out into the sun. That was all.

It would be enough. The image of Marcel in the meadow-glowing,

shimmering like his skin was made of a million diamond facets-was burned into my memory. No human who saw that would ever forget. The Ministry couldn't allow it. Not if they wanted to keep their city inconspicuous.

I looked at the slight gray glow that shone through the opened windows.

‘We'll be too late,’ I whispered, my throat closing in panic.

She shook her head. ‘Right now, he's leaning toward the melodramatic. He wants the biggest audience possible, so he'll choose the

main plaza, under the clock tower. The walls are high there. He'll wait till the sun is exactly overhead.'

'So-o we have till noon?'

'If we're lucky. If he sticks with this decision.'

The pilot came on over the intercom, announcing, first in French and then in English, our imminent landing. The seat belt lights dinged and flashed. 'How far is it from Florence to Volterra?'

'That depends on how fast you drive… Bell?'

‘Yes?’

She eyed me speculatively. ‘How strongly are you opposed to grand theft auto?’

A bright yellow Porsche screamed to a stop a few feet in front of where I paced, the word TURBO scrawled in silver cursive across its back. Everyone beside me on the crowded airport sidewalk started.

‘Hurry, Bell!’ Olivia shouted impatiently through the open passenger window.

I ran to the door and threw myself in, feeling as though I might as

well be wearing a black stocking over my head.

‘Sheesh, Olivia,’ I complained. ‘Could you pick a more conspicuous car to steal?’

The interior was black leather, and the windows were tinted dark. It felt safer inside, like nighttime.

Olivia was already weaving, too fast, through the thick airport traffic- sliding through tiny spaces between the cars as I cringed and fumbled for my seat belt.

‘The important question,’ she corrected, ‘is whether I could have stolen a faster car, and I don't think so.

Part: 18

Godsend

‘I got lucky.’

‘I'm sure that will be very comforting at the roadblock.’

She laughed a laugh. ‘Trust me, Bell. If anyone sets up a roadblock, it will be behind us.’ She hit the gas then as if to prove her point.

I should have watched out the window as first the city of Florence and then the Tuscan landscape flashed past with blurring speed. This was my first trip anywhere, and my last, too. But Olivia's driving frightened me, even though I knew I could trust her behind the wheel. And I was too tortured with anxiety to see the hills or the walled towns that looked like castles in the distance.

‘Do you see anything more?’

‘Something is going on,’ Olivia muttered. ‘Festival. The streets are full

of people and red flags. What's the date today?’

I wasn't entirely sure. ‘The nineteenth, maybe?’

‘Well, that's ironic. It's Saint Marcellus Day.’

‘Which means?’

She chuckled darkly… ‘The city holds a celebration every year. As the legend goes, a Christian missionary, a Father Marcellus- of the Valium, in fact-drove all the angels from Volterra fifteen hundred years ago.

The story claims he was martyred in Rockville, still trying to drive away from the angel scourge.

Of course, that's nonsense-he's never left the city. But that's where some of the superstitions about things like crosses and garlic come from. Father Marcellus used them so successfully. And angels don't trouble Volterra, so they must work.' Her smile was sardonic. 'It's become more of a celebration of the city, and recognition for the police force-after all, Volterra is an amazingly safe city.

'The police get the credit.'

I was realizing what she meant when she'd said ironically. ‘They're not going to be very happy if Marcel messes things up for them on St. Marcellus Day, are they?’

She shook her head, her expression grim. ‘No. They'll act very quickly.’

I looked away, fighting against my teeth as they tried to break through the skin of my lower lip. Bleeding was not the best idea right now.

The sun was terrifyingly high in the pale blue sky.

‘He's still planning on noon?’ I checked.

‘Yes. He's decided to wait. And they're waiting for him.’

‘Tell me what I have to do.’

She kept her eyes on the winding road-the needle on the speedometer was touching the far right on the dial.

‘You don't have to do anything. He just must see you before he moves into the light. And he has to see you before he sees me.’

‘How are we going to work?’

A small red car seemed to be racing backward as Olivia zoomed around it.

‘I'm going to get you as close as possible, and then you're going to run in the direction I point you.’

I nodded slightly… ‘Try not to trip,’ she added. ‘We don't have time for a concussion today.’

I groaned. That would be just like me-ruin everything, destroy the world, in a moment of klutziness.

The sun continued to climb in the sky while Olivia raced against it. It was too bright: and that had me

panicking. He wouldn't feel the need to wait until noon.

‘There,’ Olivia said abruptly, pointing to the castle city atop the closest hill.

I stared at it, feeling the very first hint of a new kind of fear. Every minute since yesterday morning it seemed like a week ago-when Olivia had spoken his name at the foot of the stairs, there had been only one fear. And yet, now, as I stared at the ancient sienna walls and towers crowning the peak of the steep hill, I felt another,

more selfish kind of dread thrill through me.

I supposed the city was very beautiful. It terrified me.

‘Volterra,’ Olivia announced in a flat, icy voice.

VOLTERRA- WE BEGAN THE STEEP CLIMB, AND THE ROAD GREW CONGESTED. As we wound higher, the cars became too close together for Olivia to weave insanely between them anymore. We slowed to a crawl behind a little tan Peugeot.

‘Olivia,’ I moaned. The clock on the dash seemed to be speeding up.

‘It's the only way in,’ she tried soothing me. But her voice was too strained to comfort.

The cars continued to edge forward, one car length at a time. The sun beamed down brilliantly, seeming already overhead.

The cars crept one by one toward the city. As we got closer, I could see cars parked by the side of the road with people getting out to walk the rest of the way.

At first- I thought it was just impatience-something I could easily understand. But then we came around

a switchback, and I could see the filled parking lot outside the city wall, the crowds of people walking through the gates. No one was being allowed to drive through.

‘Olivia,’ I whispered urgently.

‘I know,’ she said. Her face was chiseled from ice.

Now that I was looking, and we were crawling slowly enough to see, I could tell that it was very windy. The people crowding toward the gate gripped their hats and tugged their hair out of their faces.

Their clothes billowed around them. I also noticed that red was everywhere. Red shirts, red hats, red flags dripping like long ribbons beside the gate, whipping in the wind as I watched, the brilliant crimson scarf one woman had tied around her hair was caught in a sudden gust.

It twisted up into the air above her, writhing like it was alive. She reached for it, jumping in the air, but it continued to flutter higher, a patch of bloody color against the dull, ancient walls.

‘Bell.’ Olivia spoke swiftly in a fierce, deep voice. ‘I can't see what the guard here will decide now-if this doesn't work, you're going to have to go in alone. You're going to have to run. Just keep running in the course they tell you to. Don't get lost.’

I repeated what I had said- the name repeatedly, trying to get it down. ‘Or 'the clock tower,' if they speak English. I'll go around and try to find a secluded spot somewhere behind the city where I can go over the wall.’ I nodded two times…

‘Marcel will be under the clock tower, to the north of the square. There's a narrow alleyway on the right, and he'll be in the shadow there. You have to get his attention before he can move into the sun.’ I nodded furiously.

Olivia was near the front of the line. A man in a navy-blue uniform was directing the flow of traffic, turning the cars away from the full lot. They U-turned and headed back to find a place beside the road. Then it was Olivia's turn…